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HOW TO WRITE YOUR BEST PROJECT (SO FAR)

Project Writing Guidelines for Students

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INTRODUCTION

The presence of supporting information, skillset and different approaches is necessary for an efficient interdisciplinary project. Writing successful project proposals, having the ability to execute them, and knowing how to secure project-based financing all have significant relevance and need a certain expertise. The drafting and implementation of project proposals can be a proper puzzle and this manual here is your perfect guide through all the steps needed for your new project.

Learn step by step how to:

- write efficient project proposal;
- make a budget;
- be heard and make an effective communication plan;
- make a statement through your pitch;
- have an impact with your project;
- avoid the common mistakes.

Work through this manual and keep in mind that every project is a bit different and might need adjustments. However, the key points remain the same and hopefully you will find great ideas on how to write and execute your best projects so far.

1. STEP BY STEP GUIDE

1.1. Define the Goal

Setting the goal establishes the framework for the project, hence it is frequently the first step in writing a project proposal. In this chapter, the reader can learn more about how to define their project's goal (Joshi, n.d.).

The goal of the project (Joshi, n.d.):

- should not be too vague;
- should be in line with the problem analysis;
- should be written in a simple and understandable way.

1.1.1. Problem and Need

Everything you write in the proposal begins with the problem (Culture & Creativity, n.d.). Thus, it would be a clever idea to start writing the proposal by analyzing the problem that you are trying to solve. The problem analysis directly affects project planning because it has a significant impact on how all potential solutions are designed. To make a long story short, your project should be the answer and the solution to an existing problem (Culture & Creativity, n.d.).

So, the first step would be to (Culture & Creativity, n.d.):

- identify key problems existing in the situation;
- try to establish a hierarchy and figure out what is causing the key problem and what are the effects/consequences of the key problem.

The next step is to convert the negative circumstances of the problems into solutions by answering the question “What are we striving to achieve?”. A crucial part of defining the goal is also to define the objectives of the project. Whilst a goal is a broad statement that defines what your project wants to achieve, an objective gives detailed statements describing the ways how the project will reach the goal (Culture & Creativity, n.d.).

The objectives of the project (Joshi, n.d.):

- should support the goal;
- should be specific, measurable, achievable, realistic and with a clear time-frame;
- should address the 5 W's:
 1. Why are you proposing a particular thing?
 2. What method will you adopt to reach the goal?
 3. When will you conduct the project?
 4. Where will you execute the project?
 5. Who will be the primary stakeholders/beneficiaries?

While defining the project's goal, it is also important to determine and take into account the project's needs (Gisclard-Biondi, 2021).

The projects needs should include (Gisclard-Biondi, 2021):

- the goal, its objectives and its context and environment;
- the project scope (what services will be affected, the key and support elements of the project);
- who will be the end-users and their needs, also a list of stakeholders;
- a SWOT analysis to determine the opportunities and risks associated with the need;
- the expected benefits;
- Key Performance Indicators (KPIs), metrics that will allow you to evaluate whether the objective was achieved;
- the potential impacts on the company.

1.1.2. Resources

The project proposal should clearly state what resources are needed to achieve its objectives since resources are of decisive importance for the implementation of the project (CSNM, n.d.). Therefore, a project proposal should describe what the existing resources are, what else is needed, and how they will be used (Simmons, 2022). When considering existing and lacking resources, we encourage you to consider direct costs and indirect costs, which will be introduced later in the budgeting part. On top of mapping out resources needed in the project,

we also suggest proposal writers to include a resource management plan in the project proposal. A resource allocation plan serves a role to present how resources, including human resources, IT resources, team resources are employed in the project (Weller, 2018). What we hope to achieve here is to convey a sense of financial and operational transparency as well as accountability to your sponsors.

Here is an example of a resource allocation plan: [Free Resource Planning Templates | Smartsheet](#) (Weller, 2018).

1.1.3. Expected Impacts and Outputs

After defining the goal, it is necessary to think about the project's expected outputs and impacts. The results of the project are the combination of outputs, outcomes (medium-term consequences of the project) and impact. (Dolfing, 2020)

Outputs are described as immediate results achieved soon after the completion of an activity (what you are doing to the goal of the project). The impact is the long-term result that came, because of the activities undertaken in the project. (Dolfing, 2020)

1.2. Whom Are You Writing to

The main purpose of a project proposal is to get approval from decision-makers (Resource Centre, 2015). As such, the project proposal outlines the core value proposition of the project. To sum it up, the proposal is intended to attract the attention of stakeholders and project sponsors (Resource Centre, 2015).

1.2.1. Requirements of the Funding Bodies

If you plan your activities in advance and choose the right funders to apply for, before you apply for funding, you are much more likely to have a successful application. It is also important to look at the specific requirements of funding for your project and to keep them in mind while writing the proposal (Resource Centre, 2015).

The general guidelines for writing:

- be specific about your activities;
- provide evidence that the project is needed;
- make the budget as specific as possible;
- think about the funder's priorities.

1.3. Deadlines and Time Management

Proposals are generally drafted during one of the early phases of your project (Simmons, 2022). As such, time estimates are often crude at best. That being said, it is still important to meet deadlines, so a good solution would be to develop a time management plan for the project (Simmons, 2022).

It is a good idea to plan out your activities and take into account how much time every action generally takes. Oftentimes there are administrative procedures that take a lot of time and which don't depend on you, so be prepared for that. Working in teams may also take more time than initially planned, for example, what would happen if someone were unable to fulfill their part. An important part of time management is also risk management, which is essential to understand which risks are worth taking and get us where we want to be (Simmons, 2022).

1.4. Introducing Your Team

Now it is time to introduce your team to the financing body that you are presenting your project proposal to. Introduce your team members, i.e., the contributors to the projects in a brief and concise manner. You can simply introduce their name, positions and tasks undertaken in the team or go more in-depth into their suitability, like matching their experience(s) and expertise with their roles.

By introducing your team members to the financing body, the most important thing we hope to achieve here is to leave them with a good impression that our professionals are capable of making good use of the fund and executing the project with adequate professional support.

1.5. Budgeting

What is the most vital part of a project proposal besides your original and impressive project ideas? Yes, it is budgeting! Budgeting is the next essential step after your team has gathered all the ideas about the ‘what, when, why, where and how’ about the practicality and implementation plans. So now it is time to think about the question of “How Much?”.

In practice, however, we can easily get stuck with figuring out how much a project is going to cost if it involves several phases, elements, or parties. Just like Jessie J’s most well-known song Price Tag goes: “it’s all about the money, money, money”. So, let’s try to break down the possible costs that might arise in a project. It might not be a catch-all, one-off solution to your current stagnation with budgeting, but our goal here is to inspire! We will include as many dimensions or factors that could affect the actual expenditure as possible to help you avoid falling short of financial support during implementation. So here we go.

The first step of budgeting is, without doubt, to brainstorm all the possible costs that necessarily amount to the success of your project, which usually includes categories such as staffing, equipment, utilities, professional services, travel and relevant indirect costs (which will be explained more later). A great way to start is to use historical data from your previous projects or learn from other projects, see how they respond to changes across time and keep expenditure under control. (Bridges, 2019)

Now we need to further break down each big piece into smaller part. For example, under the staffing section of the budget, factors including wages, insurance, interests and pension (employer-sponsored) should be taken into consideration. Next, we can specify the pay for each position according to its workload and corresponding salary level. We need to be mindful here that if a project lasts for an extended period of time, let’s say 3 years, we should also calculate the possible annual pay rise according to regular practices. Professional services, similarly, can be divided into expenditures that arise from legal support, accounting, outsourcing or subcontracting and personnel training.

Many budgeting templates available online will help you to do a quick check and locate the missing boxes when drafting your budget. Besides, you can use a management software like

“Project Manager” to help you to visualize the progress and the corresponding expenditures. It also allows you to make changes to the baseline in the implementation stage. (Simmons, 2022)

Here are several examples of budget templates available on the internet just for your reference:

- [37 Handy Business Budget Templates \(Excel, Google Sheets\) ▷ TemplateLab](#)
- [Complete Guide to Modernizing Your Financial Processes - Planful](#)
- [Monthly Expenses Tracking Budget Template \(dremelmicro.com\)](#)

To avoid missing costs, we introduce you to the concept of direct vs indirect costs. Direct costs are variable costs that have a direct link to manufacture and sales of a product (sometimes a service being offered to clients). Indirect costs, on the other hand, prone to be fixed overhead expenses that keep a business running (Udavant, 2021). So, they serve an auxiliary role to help fulfill the main tasks intended for the project.

While direct costs will usually include direct labor and materials costs or manufacturing supplies or equipment costs, indirect costs cover a broader range of spending. (Accounting Tools, 2022) Indirect costs may arise from administration, utilities, various type of insurances, production supervision or quality control costs, personnel mobility (e.g. business trips), resources obtained through connections with other businesses, associations and societies (e.g. in the form of membership) or subscriptions of certain commercial services (e.g. LinkedIn Premiums could be necessary for the human resources department to facilitate talent acquisition for the project). It is worth noting that sometimes we cannot tell whether a cost is strictly a direct cost or indirect costs if they serve more than a single purpose, so we need to distinguish them flexibly according to the production system. (Udavant, 2021)

1.6. Summarizing the Impact of the Project

Apart from demonstration of the project’s goal, a powerful and convincing summary of the project impact can hugely boost the approval of fund application. Although each project tackles a different problem, there are general techniques to persuade sponsors of its social weight, sustainability and oftentimes profitability.

1.6.1. Conduct Stakeholder Analysis

After giving a clear definition of the status quo and identifying the key problem previously mentioned in Step 1, impact telling should dive into a group-specific case. If a project targets expats in the city, then stakeholder analysis should thoroughly examine both the direct outcome and impact on expats of different origins, education levels, classes, genders, religious backgrounds etc. A meticulous analysis work will help the reviewer to gain a concrete understanding and impression of how this project will impact each interest group involved, which helps your project to stand out in the selection process.

1.6.2. Competitive Analysis

To avoid overlapping with the goal-setting part, we suggest you to focus on the comparison between the likely, positive changes that the project might bring and the inefficient or even counterproductive effects yielded by other existing, prevalent, yet ill-designed alternatives. It will also help you to gain a better understanding of the comparative advantage of your project and pitch it to sponsors.

1.6.3. Novelty of the Project

Lastly, do not forget to emphasize the novelty of the project, its approaches and the methodology that you adopt. Highlighting its research base and innovation can add to the credibility of your project and its outcome, which further resonate with the impact you have previously mentioned.

2. VARIA

2.1. Things to Think About

When writing a project proposal various aspects need to be considered. This section brings forward a few questions to ask yourself in order to reach the best possible outcome for your project.

Content:

- does the proposal actually reflect what you want to accomplish;
- are the goals and objectives realistic and achievable;
- are the goals and objectives measurable;
- are you able to defend and explain every section of the proposal;
- what are the risks that come with this project.

Writing:

- is the language used appropriate - check to see if you have used any slang terms or have used too many phrases or terms from literary fiction;
- do you use any filler words;
- if a project is written by multiple people – does the language flow as if it was written by one person;
- did you run a spell-check.

Visuals:

- does the organization you are submitting the project to have its own template and formatting requirements;
- do you have visuals to illustrate your data and make it easier to understand;
- are the colors you chose to use in your graph easy to differentiate (if not, this may be an issue for colorblind people or if someone prints your project proposal out in black and white ink);
- is the font machine reader friendly;
- do all your graphs and images have descriptions.

Tools to make your project better:

- PDF accessibility checker
 - <https://pave-pdf.org/index.html?lang=en>;
 - a lot of software like MS Word or MS PowerPoint will have accessibility checkers built into the program.
- Spell-checker
 - Estonian spell-checker https://www.filosoft.ee/html_speller_et/
 - English spell-checker <https://www.grammarly.com/spell-checker>
 - Russian spell-checker <https://www.russiancorrector.com/>

TIP: Ask someone, who is not familiar with your project to read through the proposal and have them write down any questions that come up and any sections they didn't fully understand. This way you can cut out any of the confusing aspects and make the proposal stronger.

2.2. Common Mistakes

Here are listed the most common mistakes by Repoa (2007) and Peregrine (n.d.).

Mistakes in a title:

- the title does not give the reader an impression of what to expect from the document;
- the title of the project proposal is unclear, long and clumsy;
- some titles do not reflect what was intended to be done, the title is inadequate, too wordy and lacks focus.

Mistakes in the introduction:

- unsatisfactorily written;
- lacked clarity and focus;
- muddled and poor language use;
- too much irrelevant information;
- old and out-of-date data and references;
- knowledge gap.

Problem statement:

- not a well-written problem statement;
- no problem statement;
- lack of clarity, articulation and lack of focus;
- muddled by attempting to cover many issues;
- problem statement is not even relevant.

Objectives:

- the proposed concept is not sufficiently described and therefore does not inspire confidence;
- the project does not take into account the needs of the target group;
- the goal is unrealistic or unachievable;
- objectives included many general objectives that obscured the intended research.

Relevance of hypotheses:

- inadequate presentation;
- hypotheses not stated;
- irrelevant hypotheses;
- lack of clearly formulated hypotheses.

Quality of text and presentation:

- poor text and presentation represented;
- limited knowledge in proposal writing;
- lack of understanding of the concept of poverty;
- insufficient time for proposal writing;
- literature review is not appropriate;
- the application form contains errors in design, volume and the style of the application is not official.

Content:

- there is little innovation in the idea, it is possible to repeat what has already been done;
- there are too many actions planned and/or they are not connected or the connection is illogical;

- the implementation of some actions are associated with a large number of risks;
- the application form contains errors in design, volume and the style of the application is not official;
- the project raises a lot of questions from experts or is drawn up without consultation with the relevant experts;
- the application does not meet the evaluation criteria;
- the competence of the creators of the project does not meet the required qualifications.

Budget:

- in the description of the budget unreasonable expenses;
- perhaps the overestimated budget of the project or the budget does not correspond to the goals of the project, or vice versa, a small budget;
- lack of information on future prospects and self-financing after the end of the project, if applicable;
- there is no proposal or description of the work of the project after completion.

2.3. Tips for Presentation and Pitching

Here is a list of tips for your presentation and pitching:

- Keep your presentation/pitch simple with a minimalist design, deliver a clear and concise message. Use pastel colors, soothing tones relax the audience.
- Put a visual representation of the data. It provides clients with accessible and interesting information. Prepare a second, readable version of the presentation/pitch. This version should include key ideas, markers and descriptions so that people can understand it even if they are not present at the presentation (Grant, 2017).
- Using visual elements like animation if presenters are aware how to use contemporary trends in designing presentations and “elevator pitches” can help immerse the audience and bring the presentation to life on the screen (SK Startup Institute, n.d.)
- Pitch should have a clear beginning, middle and ending. This reduces the risk of a bored audience and nerves before presenting.
- Follow the checklist for the presentation. Clearly mark timing and transitions between slides.

- Help the audience understand what problem you are solving or what opportunity you present and explain technical terms and abbreviations. Before you create your presentation, define your message and purpose - what are you trying to do and what are you trying to achieve?
- Pitches should only contain primary information.
- Always include at least one form of contact – social, email and phone.
- Organize the content in a logical manner, avoid repetition.
- Practice the pitch several times, it will make you feel more comfortable. If you can't answer audience questions clearly and eloquently, people will think you are unprepared.
- Be well rested, mentally and physically, cognitive abilities are greatly reduced when a person does not get enough sleep. It's far better to be energetic and well-rested before a presentation than to be exhausted, staying up the night before to "prepare". People are more confident and less stressed the next morning when they have had a good night's sleep. (Levy, 2017)

2.4. Communication, Dissemination, Marketing

2.4.1. Importance of Communication

The success of a project largely depends on the efficiency of its communication network. Therefore, having a well-thought-out plan for your project communication is vital, as everything in a project is based on how efficiently we perform this. Lasswell's Maxim defines communication as “who says what to whom in what channel with what effect”. Communication is exchanging information from one point of the project to the other point in an efficient manner. Communication in project management is gaining importance every day and is the center of all management processes soon. It starts working from day one of the venture and continues for the entire life span of the project. It provides regular updates to notify the status of the project as well as its performance capacity (Rajkumar, 2010).

2.4.2. Creating a Communication Plan

The first and one of the most important steps of thinking about how your project will be communicated, is creating a communication plan. A project communication plan is a guideline

for dispensing details of a project to invested parties. An effective plan includes what kind of information will be distributed, to whom and how often they will be updated. Hence, your communication plan should include the following constituents (Eby, 2022; Wrike, n.d.):

- Decide objectives: What will be the purpose of your communication?
- Determine the audience: Who are the stakeholders in this project?
- Write your message: What will the message be for each type of communication?
- Choose the channel: How will the message be delivered? Will it be a formal report emailed out to all stakeholders? Or will it be an informal verbal debrief during a team meeting?
- Set a timeline: When will you deliver your message? Do your stakeholders require weekly or monthly reports? Is there a deadline to meet?

2.4.3. Communication Management

Now that you have assembled the communication plan, the plan has to be implemented in action and managed. This job is usually done for a project manager, who delegates tasks, manages time, which also includes keeping track of important deadlines and holds meetings to ensure everyone is aware of their responsibilities.

2.4.4. Communication Monitoring and Analysis

In addition to managing the communication, the execution of the plan has to be monitored and analyzed. Communicators need to constantly monitor and review the success of their communication processes and systems with a view to forming a basis upon which assessments can be made. Analysis in communication plays a vital role because it allows to subjectively assess the effectiveness of communication, besides detecting the actions that worked and had a positive impact along with the steps that did not perform that well. This with the aim to learn from mistakes and successes and eventually make necessary adjustments and changes. This step should not be overlooked, especially when considering that communication for each project differs according to objectives and goals, audiences wished to reach, channels chosen and much more.

2.4.5. Possible Obstacles in Communication

Although each project is unique, there are some common obstacles important to note as a reminder. These challenges can be (Rajkumar, 2010):

- **Political:** whenever there are many groups involved, there is the possibility of vested interests and power games getting in the way of dialogue. Project managers therefore need to make special efforts to be aware of the key political players in the organization.
- **Cultural:** Communication at the interface between two organizations with vastly differing cultures can be difficult. Project managers can ease such difficulties by understanding the divergences in attitudes between the parties involved and then acting as intermediaries to facilitate communication.
- **Linguistic:** Linguistics needs to be understood in the sense of specialized terminology used by different disciplines such as accounting, IT, marketing, etc.

3. AFTER THE PROPOSAL

First, congratulate yourself! You did it, you wrote and submitted a project proposal! This is just the first step in the project management process.

Now it is necessary to wait to find out the results of the proposal. If it got rejected then you can analyze your project proposal to see where you went wrong, seek additional counsel with other more experienced project writers and correct any mistakes. If the proposal got approved, then you must move on to the grant and consortium agreement.

The consortium agreement is usually signed before signing the grant agreement. It is often based on a model agreement and changed to suit each project. In it the project consortium decides on various aspects like (FFG, n.d.):

- general aspects of the implementation like duration of work, the laws the projects obey, when the project goes into work;
- rules of what the consortium is obliged to do like keeping information safe, meeting deadlines, what happens when members don't take part in meetings etc.;
- decision making and internal policy;
- financials;
- intellectual property rights;
- other issues like liability, non-disclosure, dispute resolution etc.

The grant agreement is a contract between the consortium and organization offering funding. It needs to be signed by the organization and head of the consortium. The other members will sign Accession Forms. The contract will consist of multiple parts, for example a section for the course of action the project will take, the budgeting section and the accession form. (European Commission, n.d.)

Next is the implementation stage. You will have outlined the implementation process in your project proposal and can now act accordingly. The results from your project must be reported and made available to the necessary audience. This can involve:

- keeping track of the actions taken, money flow and timelines within the project;
- setting up and using a portal for continuous reporting;
- presenting it at a conference or event if needed.

When dealing with the deliverables and general project info you must provide the means to keep the data safe and protected. Project data must be preserved. If the nature of the project allows it, then open access to the deliverables should also be provided. If the results are chosen to be shared via a project webpage, then sustainability and having it be in working order is also something the project team needs to think about.

It is also necessary to write a final report. It must include both the financial and content report. After the project has finished and the final report has been submitted, then the project may be audited. The auditing team will usually be from or contracted by the organization, to whom you submitted the proposal. If the project is done according to the proposal and tracked meticulously, there should be no problems with this section. Even if any questions arise with the auditing team you can just submit the missing info.

In summary after project proposal writing, you need to be mindful the next steps:

- waiting for the results and making any necessary corrections;
- constructing and confirming the grant and consortium agreement;
- continuous reporting;
- writing and submitting the final report;
- data protection and preservation;
- auditing.

There will always be special cases and unforeseeable situations during the project running process. There are several ways to mitigate that:

- work with partners you can trust and that have proven their ability to take part in the project;
- make previous agreements and decide on the consequences of what happens if one of the participants is not doing their work as promised;
- if you need an extension on your deadline for some reason, then apply for it as soon as you know it is necessary and do everything in your power to stick to the deadline. prepare the justifications and amendments ahead of time;
- keep your book-keeping organized, so in case of any monetary issues you can find out where it went wrong.

SUMMARY

This manual is all about having a strong base for your new project and concludes ideas from the start of the project until the implementation. Writing interdisciplinary projects can be challenging, but with certain guidelines and a strong vision the outcome can offer a great deal of satisfaction. Hopefully, this manual boosted your confidence in regards of writing and executing successful project proposals and offered valuable insights to consider with. You should now have a good knowledge about project planning, budgeting, communicating, pitching, reporting, submitting and implementing.

No excuses now! Let your ideas flow and start with writing your best project so far!

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