

Concept Paper Template

Why a concept paper?

- A concept paper can help transform a good idea into a focused, high-quality proposal.
- It is an efficient and effective way to obtain quick feedback on your project. This will help you and your collaborators to build a more competitive proposal - for example, by providing guidance on how to address weaknesses and bolster strengths.
- A majority of NIH and NSF funding, as well as state and foundation funding, is done through unsolicited, investigator-initiated proposals. Having one or more concept papers ready is good preparation for tailoring future proposals to the objectives of funding sources.
- A concept paper allows you to carefully consider all aspects of your project and provide focused descriptions of each component.
- A concept paper can be a good way to introduce yourself to colleagues, potential collaborators, and sometimes program officers, thereby learning how to better fit your concept into the area outlined in an RFP.

Note:

1. Writing a concept paper and proposal is very different from writing a journal article. The overarching goal of a proposal is to convince the sponsor of the significance of your proposed project.
2. Know, and write, for your audience. Consider drafting two separate versions of your concept paper, especially if the project would be interdisciplinary.
 - One audience is your research colleagues - share your concept paper with trusted colleagues, mentors, or other experts for critical feedback and input. This version can include jargon and technical language, as your audience is fellow experts.
 - A second version is for potential sponsors, collaborators, and others outside the field who might have an interest in the concept. Avoid jargon and technical language in this version as it may only obfuscate your ideas.
3. Your concept paper is essentially your sales pitch - you want to sell your idea based on its significance and potential impact. Tell your story effectively. Demonstrate how your project aligns with the priorities and mission of the funder. Leave the reader the ability to evaluate your ideas.

TITLE OF RESEARCH PROJECT

Dr. <Name>, <Faculty Position>

<Department>

<Institution>

<email>@wherever.edu, <phone>

Summary (~2 paragraphs)

Briefly summarize (1) the significant question, problem, or gap you will address and why it is important; (2) expected outcome(s); and (3) the potential broader impact. The first two sentences should be particularly persuasive regarding the project's significance and impact so as to grab your audience and keep them reading.

Include language to demonstrate you understand the strategic priorities of the targeted funder as well as the types of projects they fund. Make a clear and strong link between their priorities and your research. Use words, phrases, and other information from the funder's solicitation so that a program officer would see their organization reflected in your project. The goal here is to explain concisely how your research advances the cause.

Background and Purpose (2-3 paragraphs)

The goal of this section is to convince the funder you are knowledgeable about your research topic and more research is necessary to fill in the gaps, expand upon the literature, or address critical problems. Start with a **clear, concise description of the research topic** (not your project - that's the next section). Include a brief summary of the literature citing only pivotal, significant, and compelling sources. This will provide context for your project. Discuss what others have discovered and/or accomplished. Highlight if you discover there is little or no research directly aligned with your project.

Describe the ***purpose of your research project***: identify the problem or need you intend to address and how your project will address it. Provide evidence to support the contention that your research project addresses a significant and/or timely problem. Relevant data can be convincing, so use it if you have it - just avoid getting bogged down in minutia.

Describe ***why your project matters***: keep in mind that most program officers are not as immersed as you are in the topic. You must persuade them that they really should care about the specific research problem. Do this by linking the problem to their organization's priorities and describing in broad terms the potential short- and long-term impact of your project.

Project Description (3-4 paragraphs)

Concisely describe your research project, including ***what you plan to do***, ***who is involved***, and ***who will benefit*** (directly and indirectly). Be direct - avoid the temptation to get mired in details. If applicable, ***highlight the innovative aspects of your research approach*** to set your project apart from the other proposals the program officer reads.

List the ***research questions, goal(s), and objectives*** of your project (you laid the foundation in the previous section, so no elaboration is needed). Briefly describe how you will ***conduct the research***, including methodology, the data to be collected, and how the data will be analyzed. Describe ***major milestones and a general timeline*** for what you will accomplish - again, avoid the temptation to include too many details. Finally, describe the ***expected outcomes*** of your project, linked to your research questions, goals, and objectives. Discuss these outcomes in terms of their impact on your target population and others who will benefit directly and indirectly.

Project Needs and Key Personnel (~1 paragraph)

This section should include an ***estimate of total costs*** (direct and indirect), ***categories of expenses***, and the ***project timeframe*** (start/end dates in months/years). Discuss your ***qualifications as PI*** and the ***expertise of your team as a whole***. Do not include a detailed budget. That is for the full proposal; but begin a spreadsheet to store all the details.

Impact of the Project (~1 paragraph)

The purpose of this section is to reaffirm the importance of your project to the funding agency's mission. Briefly restate why the project is important, its expected outcomes, and how it will add new knowledge to your field and ***inform policy and practice***. End the paper with a strong statement of how your project aligns with strategic priorities, describe how your expected outcomes will impact the targeted population, your institution and beyond.

References

References are not necessary for a concept paper, but have them ready should anyone wish to see it.