

graphics for brevity and understanding

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If you're putting too much energy into writing reports, it may be time for a graphic approach. This article sketches strategy for writing more successful grant proposals, but the techniques can be equally helpful in writing Extension reports.

The effective visual display of project planning information in a grant proposal may make the difference in whether it's funded. Providing your proposal addresses all criteria, the deciding factor may be the precision of your communication. Precision in communication in grant proposals results from clarity in design. Clarity begins with a vivid and organized plan in the mind of the author, translated to carefully defined and functional procedures, and communicated in writing with precision, brevity, and artistic appeal.

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This article offers suggestions for developing proposal components that communicate with precision. It shows how to improve proposal writing with precision, brevity, and artistic appeal. Graphic presentation of information can help a novice writer or vague academician turn a general idea into a specific plan that works, and therefore, gets funded.

Precision

These are competitive times. Federal grantors fund about 10% of submitted proposals. It may take extra refinement to put your proposal above 90% of others written by equally

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qualified, often experienced proposal authors. Your grant proposals should be definite, exact, distinct, accurate, strictly following the custom and rules.

For your graphic presentation of information, first be exact about what will be done, why, when, and how. Check the facts for accuracy. Strictly follow the rules and regulations offered by the grantor.

Brevity

Now that you know precisely what you propose to do, why, and how, say it as quickly as possible. While the bureaucracy is recognized for its masses of forms, data requirements, and general "paperwork," it rewards brevity in writing. Limiting your words will save time, paper, and cost, but more importantly will result in clarity.

Graphic presentation of information can help you be brief and yet unusually thorough. Take the information. Outline it, chart it, graph it, diagram it, picture it. By being brief, you may discover better organization of proposed activities, an important planning component you've overlooked, or an inconsistency with other proposal components.

You, and the proposal reviewers, will quickly and clearly see if your design is strong and coherent, or weak and haphazard. You may be able to present graphically on one page what would take many pages of verbal explanation.

Artistic Appeal

Consider the advantage of artistic appeal. By the time the proposal reviewer reads your proposal, an appealing, professionally produced graphic presentation will likely be a welcome change from pages and pages of text.

To get artistic appeal for your graphics, get professional help. Since most proposal writing is done under time constraint, develop a graphic presentation of project components that will be included in all of your project proposals. Have a graphic done to present information that's particularly lengthy and difficult to describe in writing.

If the proposal isn't funded, you'll have some revision work done by the time you're notified to resubmit. If the proposal is funded, you can use it in project reports. Or, you can apply the graphic idea you've developed to a similar problem in another proposal. One caution: Limit your graphic presentations to where they'll be most effective and have them prepared to communicate in a conservative, business-like tone.

Experiment with organizing information on a page to illustrate relationships, time sequences, and component parts. Published and frequently used graphic presentation techniques include PERT (Program Evaluation Review

Technique), Gantt Charts, and CPM (Critical Path Method).¹ These models are valuable particularly in presenting project management plans. They are, however, only a few of the many artistic graphic presentations a creative proposal writer can design.

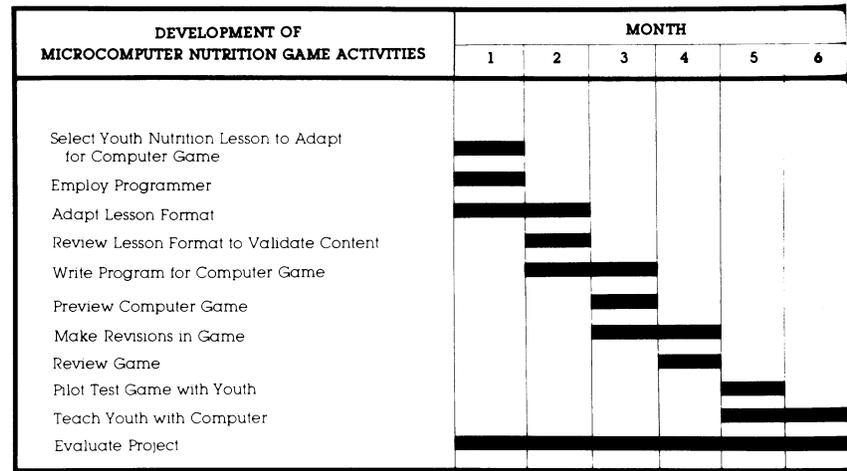


Figure 1. Gantt chart—project proposal timeline.

Finally, be on the lookout for especially effective graphic presentations of information. You may be able to use them in communicating your needs to an artist or adapt them for your project proposal.

Implications

Extension educators are increasingly being held accountable for documenting results of programs. Whether we're asking directly for funds in grant proposals or reporting on projects, it's essential that we report accurately and whenever possible, quantitatively. Even a monthly activity report of an Extension professional is an indirect funding request. We're justifying our time and thus future program dollars.

Extension personnel never seem to have enough time to read or write all of the necessary reports. Applying skills in brevity and precision in reporting will begin to ease the information overload and allow for better resource allocation. Artistic appeal in reports can increase the credibility of Extension programs by expanding the readership and cementing confidence in the quality of Extension work and our ability to be responsive to social demands.

Commit yourself to writing for results!

Footnote

1. Mary Hall, *Developing Skills in Proposal Writing*, 2nd ed. (Portland, Oregon: Continuing Education Publications, 1977), pp. 186-90.