

Certain mistakes can instantly kill your proposal's chance of being funded. Luckily, however, the following ten proposal-killing mistakes can be easily prevented if you ensure three points guide your proposal writing process. Write with the donor in mind, carefully research and fully understand your idea, and allot the time necessary to develop a proposal that is truly a work of art.

- **The request is not of interest to the funder.** This is perhaps the worst kind of rejection letter. The implication is that you have not made the match between the project and the donor. Instead, the same proposal has been sent to various donors without changing a word, or no one bothered to read the directions in the Request for Proposal (RFP). Either way, this is the mark of carelessness and therefore, completely preventable.
- **Missing or incomplete answers to RFP questions.** Although you might not be able to imagine who would leave a proposal half-finished, it is a common problem. If you have not addressed all the information the donor requests, then the reviewers will not be able to score your proposal. As a consequence, your proposal will be eliminated from the competition without the idea having been considered. To avoid this mistake, thoroughly review the RFP.
- **The problem is not well defined, documented, or understandable.** This mistake is commonly made when a proposal is rushed or when the research for the idea has not taken place or is minimal. To define the problem, you must first conduct a needs assessment, which will yield data to help shape your proposal.
- **The objectives do not match the problem statement, and are not specific or measurable.** A consequence of an ill defined problem, this flaw occurs when the need/statement of significance is not clear in your mind. If the heart of your proposal lacks clarity, the objectives will not be clear, measurable, or specific. You can only create measurable objectives once you are thoroughly aware of the literature and the problem for which you are seeking funding.
- **Staff responsibilities and time commitment to the project are not explained.** Or, if they are, they are peripherally mentioned by sending the reader to the appendix. All RFPs will request sections on key personnel and their responsibilities. A clear, concise explanation of key personnel and their respective time commitments should be included in the body of your proposal, unless otherwise directed by the RFP.
- **Use of jargon, abbreviations, and/or buzzwords.** These kinds of words seem common because you use them on a daily basis. They may, however, be foreign to your reviewers, which as a consequence will reduce your success rate. An easy way to avoid this misstep is using a naïve reader. In particular, you should try to find a person who is educated, but not in your field.
- **The evaluation is only a summary and lacks details.** In today's environment of accountability, this mistake can be a major weakness capable of killing a proposal. Since most grant writers and researchers are not trained in this area, I recommend an extensive evaluation design by adding an evaluation expert to your team. Doing so will ensure that the evaluation is professionally tailored to your objectives and outcomes. Donors can recommend consultants and external evaluators who can assist in developing a continuous evaluation process for the duration of the proposal.
- **The budget is not substantiated by the narrative, items are not explained, and/or costs for budget items are inaccurate or inflated.** Budgets are often the bane of many grant writers and researchers, especially because they have not developed measurable objectives, and timelines. Do the research and list accurate pricing for equipment and supplies, and justify each expense. If you are truly struggling in this area, your best bet is to consult with your Office of Sponsored Research.
- **The proposal is not structurally clear.** The beginning, middle, and end of the narrative must link the text into a coherent whole. When deadlines are more important than the quality of the narrative, the framework and structure of the proposal will breakdown. If you do not believe you are submitting your best work, then wait until the next competition to ensure the quality of the proposal. Otherwise, you are simply wasting the time of everyone involved, from your team to the reviewers. Since this mistake tends to be a function of poor planning, be sure to allot enough time for the writing process.
- **The so what question is not addressed.** The compelling reason for the donor to fund your project must be made evident at the beginning of the narrative. By addressing and answering this question, you are speaking to the magnitude and importance of your request. Your proposal may be significant, grammatically perfect and have an all-star team, but if the reviewers don't see the importance of your idea at the beginning of your proposal, you run the risk of jeopardizing your funding chances.