

Afrique Research Support Hub (ARSH)



Topic: Writing the Proposal

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Focus Areas

- Breaking down sections
- Building a compelling narrative
- Writing with clarity and persuasion



What We Will Cover Today

01

Understanding each section and its purpose

02

Telling a coherent, compelling research story

03

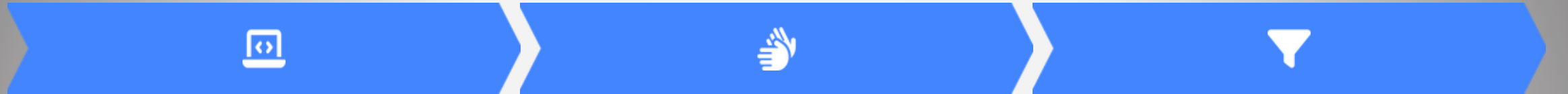
Writing techniques that win reviewers over

04

Group exercise: drafting a proposal section

WHAT IS A RESEARCH PROPOSAL?

A research proposal is a structured document that explains:



What you want to do

Why the study is important

How the study will be conducted

The knowledge gap

The objectives

The problem

The methodology



Why Proposals Matter

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Secure Funding & Credibility

A strong proposal establishes trust and secures the financial backing necessary for your project.

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Demonstrate Feasibility & Impact

It proves that your research plan is sound and outlines the potential real-world contributions of your work.

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Align with Funder Priorities

Connect your research goals with the mission and objectives of the granting organization.



Why Strong Proposals Get Rejected

Common Rejection Reasons

- Unclear or poorly justified research problem
- Objectives not aligned with funder priorities
- Weak or missing literature context
- Methodology vague or not feasible
- Budget not well justified
- Narrative reads as disconnected sections

< 20%

Average grant success rate
for first-time applicants

*Good writing
cannot fix bad science —
but bad writing can
sink good science.*

Sections of a Proposal

- Executive Summary
- Introduction/ Background
- Problem Statement
- Objectives (SMART goals)
- Methodology

- Evaluation Plan
- Budget & Justification
- Timeline/Work Plan
- Organizational Capacity
- Sustainability & Dissemination

Section 1: Anatomy of a Health Research Proposal



Title	Specific, informative, captures the 'what & where'
Abstract	Mini-proposal: problem, aim, method, significance
Intro / Background	Context, gap, rationale, and significance
Objectives	SMART: Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, Time-bound
Methodology	Study design, population, data collection, analysis plan
Budget & Justification	Line-item budget tied directly to activities
Team & Dissemination	Who does what; how results will reach stakeholders

Executive Summary

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Purpose & Objectives

Provide a concise summary including the project's purpose, objectives, and potential impact.

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Identity & Capability

Establish who you are and why you can deliver: mission, experience, and reach.

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The Core Logic

Follow the flow: Need → Solution → Outcomes → Amount → Fit. State the ask early.



Writing a Powerful Background / Introduction

The PICO-Gap Framework for Background Writing

P – Problem — What is the health burden? Who does it affect? Scale & data.

I – Importance — Why does it matter NOW? Policy context, economic impact, equity.

C – Current knowledge gap — What has been done? Where is the evidence gap your study addresses?

O – Our approach — Your proposed solution and why it is feasible here.

Problem Statement

Core Objective

Clearly outline the problem your project addresses. Combine credible data with human context to make reviewers feel the urgency and see the solvability.

Evidence & Context

- Use current, local data and cite recent statistics.
- Segment by age, race, income, and disability.
- Explain primary drivers and barriers.

Validation & Readiness

- Show demand through waitlists and surveys.
- Include letters of support from stakeholders.
- Define why your approach is the right lever.

Equity & Impact

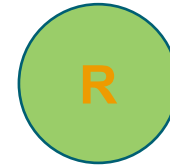
- Tie the problem statement to equity and access.
- Address disparities explicitly.
- Explain how your approach reduces gaps.

Crafting SMART Objectives



Specific

Name the population, intervention, and outcome clearly. Avoid vague verbs like 'explore' or 'understand'.



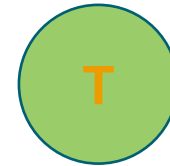
Relevant

Link directly to the problem stated in your background. Every objective must map to a funder priority.



Measurable

State how you will know you achieved it. Include an indicator or metric.



Time-bound

Specify when each objective will be completed within the project period.

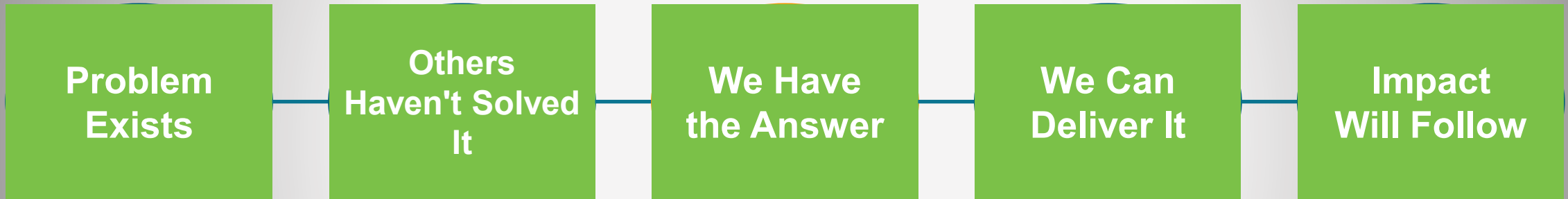


Achievable

Match scope to timeline and budget. Reviewers are experienced — over-promising destroys credibility.

Building a Compelling Narrative

A winning proposal tells ONE coherent story across ALL sections.



Logical Thread

Background → Gap → Objectives → Methods → Impact. Each section must flow from the last. Repeat key phrases intentionally.

Voice & Confidence

Use active voice. Write 'We will conduct' not 'It is proposed that...'. Reviewers fund teams, not passive experiments.

Reviewer Empathy

Reviewers read 20+ proposals. Open each section with your key message. Never bury the lead.

Writing a Compelling Narrative

1. Tell a Narrative Arc

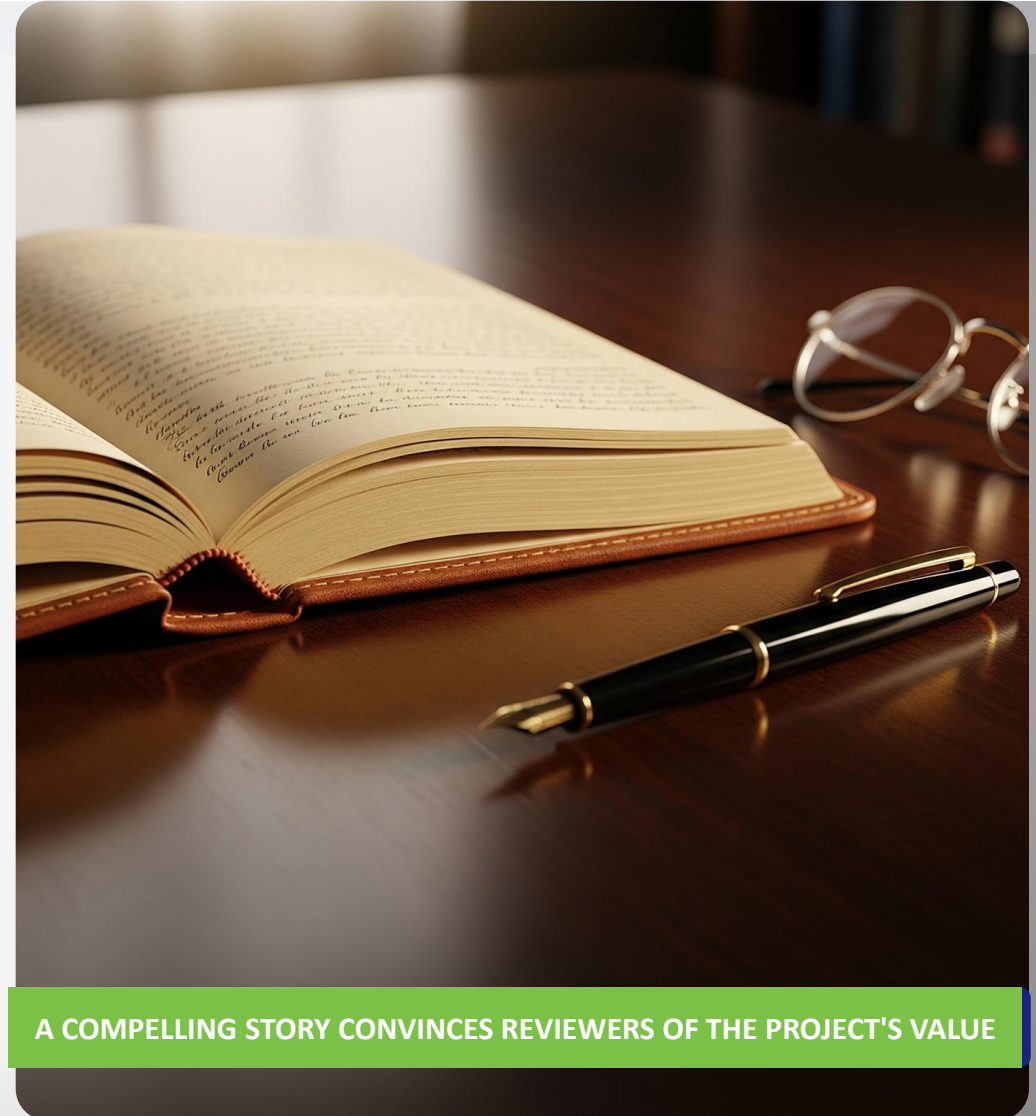
Structure your proposal as a cohesive story: identify the problem, bridge the gap, and offer the solution.

2. Show Urgency & Relevance

Clearly demonstrate why this research is needed now and its importance to the field.



3. Align with Funder's Mission

Connect your project directly to the goals and values of the granting organization.



A COMPELLING STORY CONVINCES REVIEWERS OF THE PROJECT'S VALUE

Writing with Clarity & Persuasion

 DO	 AVOID
Use simple, direct sentences (≤ 25 words)	Jargon-heavy sentences without explanation
Define every acronym on first use	Assuming reviewers know your field deeply
Use subheadings within sections	Walls of unbroken text
Quantify whenever possible	Vague language ('some', 'many', 'often')
Cite recent, relevant literature	Outdated or unsupported claims
Connect methods to each objective	Floating methods with no objective link

Tip: Read your draft aloud. If you stumble, the reviewer will too.

Writing a Rigorous Methodology Section

Study Design

Name and justify your design (RCT, cohort, cross-sectional, qualitative, mixed). Explain why it answers your research question best.

Data Collection

List tools, instruments, or protocols. Describe who collects data, training, and quality assurance measures.

Ethics & Safeguards

Confirm IRB/ethics board approval pathway, consent procedures, data privacy, and risk minimization strategies.

Setting & Population

Describe where the study happens, who participants are, inclusion/exclusion criteria, and sampling approach with justification.

Analysis Plan

State statistical tests or qualitative frameworks. Address confounders, missing data, and how you will handle limitations.

Timeline

A Gantt chart or milestone table shows feasibility. Reviewers need to believe you CAN do this in the project period.

Timeline/Workplan

Project Implementation Roadmap

Strategic milestones and deliverables mapped across quarterly progress intervals.

Q1

Phase 1: Initiation

- Project kick-off
- Resource planning
- Requirement analysis

Q2

Phase 2: Development

- Solution design
- Iterative builds
- Stakeholder review

Q3

Phase 3: Execution

- Pilot launch
- Performance tuning
- Scale deployment

Q4

Phase 4: Completion

- Impact analysis
- Final reporting
- Future roadmap

Organizational Capacity

Team Expertise & Infrastructure

A robust framework of specialized skills and operational systems ready for scale.

Team Bios

Qualifications specifically curated for the project scope and technical requirements.

Core Systems

Fiscal controls, procurement protocols, data security, and automated reporting.

Partnerships

Strategic roles and resource pooling to maximize efficiency and reach.

Governance

Board oversight, conflict policies, and continuous audit readiness.

Budget & Justification

Budget Strategy

A comprehensive financial plan designed to ensure transparent resource allocation and mission alignment for the project duration.

Allocation Detail

Provide a clear, itemized budget explaining fund allocation. Include personnel, materials, travel, and any other costs associated with the project.

Expense Justification

Break down budget by categories. Justify each expense, showing its necessity and contribution to project goals. Ensure alignment with the requested funding amount.

Sustainability & Dissemination

Project Future & Strategic Outreach

Ensuring long-term impact through mission alignment and comprehensive result sharing.

Sustainability & Alignment

Reinforce project significance and alignment with the funder's mission.

- Commitment to long-term objectives
- Scalability of proven models
- Potential for enduring impact

Dissemination Strategy

Summarize the proposal's importance and emphasize funder goals.

- Sharing findings with key stakeholders
- Amplifying project outcomes
- Engagement with partner networks

Common Mistakes to Avoid

Vague Objectives

Ensure your goals are specific, measurable, and directly address the problem at hand.

Overly Ambitious Scope

Be realistic about what can be achieved within the proposed timeframe and budget.

Weak Methodology

Provide a robust and well-justified plan for how you will conduct your research or project.

Ignoring Funder's Guidelines



Top 7 Proposal Writing Mistakes

- 1 Copy-pasting a previous proposal**
→ Each call is unique. Tailor language, objectives, and budget to this specific funder.
- 2 Ignoring the review criteria**
→ Download the scoring rubric. Mirror its language in your proposal headings.
- 3 Submitting without a peer review**
→ Have a colleague outside your specialty read it — if they're confused, reviewers will be too.
- 4 Over-promising in objectives**
→ Deliver more than promised. Under-delivering on objectives = future funding risk.
- 5 Budget mismatch with activities**
→ Every budget line must trace to a specific activity in the methodology.
- 6 Weak dissemination plan**
→ Name specific journals, conferences, and policy stakeholders, not just 'publish findings'.
- 7 Submitting at the deadline**
→ System crashes happen. Target 48 hours before deadline. Follow up to confirm receipt.

Practical Tips

Follow instructions exactly

Seek peer review before submission

Revise multiple times

Keep language professional and concise



ATTENTION TO DETAIL ENSURES A PROFESSIONAL AND SUCCESSFUL SUBMISSION

Tips for Writing a Successful Grant Proposal

1. Follow All Guidelines

Carefully adhere to the funder's guidelines regarding formatting, word limits, and required documents.

2. Be Concise and Clear

Use straightforward language and avoid jargon. Make your proposal easy to read and understand.

3. Emphasize the Impact

Highlight how the project will benefit the community, solve a pressing problem, or advance knowledge.

4. Use Data to Support Claims

Back up statements with data, research, or case studies to build credibility and demonstrate feasibility.

5. Proofread and Edit

Ensure the proposal is free from grammar and spelling errors, and double-check all required components.

ADHERENCE TO GUIDELINES AND CLEAR COMMUNICATION ARE KEYS TO SUCCESS

Conclusion & Q&A

Strong Proposal Formula

Structure + narrative + clarity = strong proposal

Continuous Improvement

Practice and feedback are essential for success.

Questions?

Thank you for your attention. We are open for Q&A.



MASTERING THE NARRATIVE SECURES THE FUNDING

Key Takeaways from Session 2

01

A proposal is a structured argument — every section should build the case for your research.

02

Use the PICO-Gap framework to write a focused, evidence-based background.

03

SMART objectives are non-negotiable — vague objectives signal weak planning.

04

Narrative coherence matters as much as content — your story must flow.

05

Write for the reviewer, not yourself — clarity, confidence, and brevity win.

06

Methodology must directly link to every objective — no floating methods.

GROUP EXERCISE

Proposal Writing Challenge

Form groups of 3–4 (8 min)

1

You are given a one-sentence health research problem statement.

Draft Background opening (10 min)

2

Write the first 3 sentences of a Background section using the PICO-Gap framework.

3

Write 2 SMART Objectives (7 min)

Ensure they are specific, measurable, and directly address the problem.

4

Gallery share (10 min)

Each group reads their draft. Group gives one strength and one improvement suggestion.

Write ONE thing you will do differently in your next proposal draft.

Thank You