



# Writing Clearly - Cheat Sheet

Writing clearly is one of the core "must do" things to increase your odds of getting grant funding. This document gives you 3 don'ts and 8 do's of writing clearly, with a short single-page cheat sheet at the end which you can use to remind yourself as you're writing.

## Why You Must Write Clearly

You are writing a grant to get money for your research and for no other purpose. Yet most people over-complicate the language, the structure, and the detail of the proposal to "impress" the reviewers. That always backfires. Your reviewers need your proposal to be clearly written and easy to understand, so that they can decide the merit of the research you're proposing. The likelihood that they're going to fund something they don't understand is almost zero. Assuming that they have time to read through the artificial complexity you introduce is assuming something that is not true. They don't have time. They don't have patience. They are pressured and busy, just like you. They review grants late at night, after a few drinks, after an argument with their kids or spouse... or whatever.

Don't assume. Instead, practice clarity. That is the first (but not only) step to getting your grant funded. On this cheat sheet, there are some reminders you can use as you're writing.

## What NOT to do

### 1. Your Grant is Not a Literary Tome

The purpose of your grant is not to impress your reviewers with your literary talent. Nor is it to prove how much you know with complicated, technical language. The purpose is to communicate simply and powerfully why your project deserves funding. It should be written in simple, direct, first-person english. It should communicate with your reviewer as if you're sitting there with them at the bar after a meeting. That creates trust and rapport. To measure your writing, use the Hemingway tool to reduce complexity: <http://www.hemingwayapp.com>. If you're running over 9th grade level, your writing is too complex.



Grant Writing is a unique form of writing - do not confuse it with other writing you do.

### 2. Your Grant is Not a Research Paper

It is not there to impress them with your research skills, nor with the 100's of citations you can dig up. They can do all that stuff too. Your grant is there to tell a powerful and convincing story about why your research is needed by the community **now**. If you find yourself writing a history of your field, you are not doing yourself any favors. (note: yes, sometimes you need to refer to outside work, but that's always within the context of a specific, relevant, and recent story)

### 3. Your Grant is Not about impressing the reviewer with facts and details

One of the greatest anti-clarity mistakes you can make is overloading your reviewer with too much detail. That includes facts, acronyms, citations, and any other attempt to spew out information that your reviewer must wade through to understand your message. Oh, you may think they will understand that long list of acronyms you just wrote, but you are wrong. They will only get frustrated. That leads to triggering a stress (fear) response in the limbic system, which in turn leads to your grant being associated with negative feelings. If you want your grant funded, the last thing you want to do is cause a fear response. Sometimes you have to introduce a few facts, but do not overload your reader with them.

## What TO do

### 1. Write when you have clarity

Clear writing comes from clear thinking. In these days of electronic gadgets, constant interruptions, and 18 hour work days, clear thinking is becoming a scarce resource. Don't succumb to the false notion that "working really hard" and "multi-tasking" somehow translates into "writing clearly." Those things never do. Shut off the interruptions. Find a comfortable place where you won't be interrupted. Shut the office door. Get clarity, focus, and write.



Before you start writing, make sure you have clear thinking about what your proposal is, why it is important, and what your key points are.

### 2. Use simple and direct language

Use simple and direct language. I'm repeating that because it is so important, and yet so rare. Understand that your college English professor may have known about literature, but she probably knew nothing about grants or the selling process. In any selling situation, if you cause cognitive overload, you will kill the sale. In your grant, do not make the mistake of thinking that you are not selling. You are. Your goal is to sell your project to the reviewer, against stiff competition. Anything that confuses the process is going to reduce your chances. Stay simple. Stay direct.

### 3. Repeat key points so that people get them

Notice how I repeated the point several times about using simple and direct language? If I'd only mentioned that once, your likelihood of retention would be far lower. Most people do not remember that much of what they read, even if it was only 20 minutes ago. And research from the marketing world has shown that, on average, people need 7 exposures to an idea before they take action on it. For that reason, it is essential that you repeat the core points of your proposal several times to assure that they get the points. You may think this is being redundant - and it is. If it is a key part of your proposal, they need to absorb it, and repetition assures that.

#### 4. Get some rest, take care of yourself

In our overworked culture, most people think "I'll sleep after I'm done with this project." That's BS. If you read the literature on sleep and performance, the message is clear: humans need 7+ hours of sleep per 24 hour period to perform optimally. You cannot be clear-headed (and therefore write clearly) if you are sacrificing your sleep and health to the Holy Grail of "hard work." Sacrificing sleep sacrifices clarity. Sacrificing clarity sacrifices your grant. And here's the thing: once you have clarity, writing happens much more efficiently.



Develop daily writing habits. A regular, focused, and short session each day is a critical habit that will serve you in all of your writing.

#### 5. Get clarity first, then write

Make no mistake: I am not advocating procrastination of your writing. What I am advocating is that you work to achieve clarity before you sit down at your computer to write. Clarity comes through brainstorming and divergent thinking - almost always away from the computer. The computer forces you to "linearize" your thinking, and if you try to linearize before you have any clarity, you end up with a mess. Your clarity doesn't need to be perfect, be-all end-all clarity about the whole project. It simply needs to be clarity about what you are writing today, and why you are writing it.

#### 6. Write every day in short, focused bouts

Research by Robert Boyce has shown that the typical pattern of procrastination followed by a writing rampage does not work. We work far more efficiently in short writing bouts, practiced every day. Get in the habit of this, and it will transform your writing experience.

## 7. Practice and practice some more

Writing great grant proposals is an art, much like playing the piano, painting, or other creative skills. It can't be learned in a day, or even a few weeks. It takes time, patience, and repetition to master. That is why writing every day is essential, because it gives practice every day, followed by time for consolidating that practice into skills.



Grant Writing is a SKILL that takes practice, training, and feedback to master.

## 8. Get training and feedback from those who are qualified to give it

We are not good judges of our own work. We are too vested in it to see the big picture and to predict how others may respond. It is essential to get feedback about your writing on a regular basis - and not just for the clarity, but for all aspects of how you are presenting and selling your work. Unfortunately, many of your colleagues will be unable to give you the feedback you need. They'll often tell you "it looks nice." It may look nice, but nobody gives out \$1 Million dollars for something that "looks nice." They give it out for a clear and compelling case for why this work should be funded now. If you are serious about grant funding, get training and mentoring.

# The Simplified Cheat Sheet

## WHAT NOT TO DO



1. DO NOT write your grant as a Literary Tome
2. DO NOT write your Grant like a Research Paper
3. DO NOT try to impress the reviewer with the number facts, details, and citations you can spew forth

## WHAT TO DO



1. DO Write when you have mental clarity
2. DO Use simple and direct language
3. DO Repeat key points so that people get them
4. DO Get some rest and take care of yourself
5. DO Get clarity first, then write
6. DO Write every day in short, focused bouts
7. DO Practice and practice some more
8. DO Get training and feedback from those who are qualified to give it