

Seven common grant proposal writing mistakes

No introductory schematic image.

Instead:

Please avoid a wall of text on pages one to three. Put a simple but colorful schematic illustration there, preferably on page one, that gives the reviewer an overview of your plan.

No preliminary data.

Instead:

For a Swedish Research Council/VR proposal, you must provide at least some evidence that your project could work. It can be a simple table or an image. It should be unpublished data produced by you or by someone you supervise as main supervisor.

Low novelty.

Instead:

Make sure this is a unique proposal. Check the literature, are you sure this has not been done before? If so, what are you planning that would entail a novel twist? Do not omit mentioning previous publications by others on the topic. Instead, describe clearly how your project proposal would lead to something better.

Low independence.

Instead:

Make sure that you have published papers with you as the senior, corresponding author, excluding your old supervisor or old senior collaborator from co-authorship. Show some previous grants that you were awarded on your own. Else it will just look as if your lab boss tries to get more grants for his/her projects that may already be funded.

Low clarity.

Instead:

Write the text with short, active voice sentences. Explain carefully to the reader what you want to do and why. Avoid trying to appear wise by adding complicated vocabulary or long sentences or words. Mark key messages in boldface. Most reviewers have no detailed experience with your exact sub-field, and limited time to read.

The introduction swamp.

Instead:

Write a short introduction. This needs only to convey why you want to do this project, and its uniqueness and novelty. It does not have to be a three-page review article with dozens of references. A short and clear introduction gives you more space for the important things; the schematic overview illustration, the experimental setup, the timeline, and the preliminary data.

The TLAs.

Instead:

Avoid littering your proposal with TLAs (three-letter acronyms). Even if some TLAs are commonly used by your research community, they slow down the reading experience, and at some level can make the proposal completely illegible. If you feel you absolutely must use some, make sure that they are all explained in full the first time used.