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5. Proposals

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Sexy Technical Communication Home

Proposals

This chapter focuses on the *proposal*—the kind of document that gets you or your organization approved or hired to do a project.

Some Preliminaries

As you get started, make sure you understand the definition we're using for proposals.

What proposals do.

A proposal is an offer or bid to do a certain project for someone. Proposals may contain other elements—technical background, recommendations, results of surveys, information about feasibility, and so on. But what makes a proposal a proposal is that it is a persuasive document that asks the audience to approve, fund, or grant permission to do the proposed project.

If you plan to be a consultant or run your own business, written proposals may be one of your most important tools for bringing in business. If you work for a government agency, nonprofit organization, or a large corporation, the proposal can be a valuable tool for initiating projects that benefit the organization or you the employee-proposer (and usually both).

A proposal should contain information that would enable the proposal's audience to decide whether to approve the project, to give you money for the project, or to hire you to do the work, and maybe all three. To write a successful proposal, put yourself in the place of your audience—the recipient of the proposal—and think about what sorts of information that person would need to feel confident about you doing the project.

It's easy to get confused about proposals. Imagine that you have a terrific idea for installing some new technology where you work and you write up a document explaining how it works

and why it's so great, showing the benefits, and then end by urging management to go for it. Is that a proposal? No, at least not in this context. It's more like a feasibility report, which studies the merits of a project and then recommends for or against it. All it would take to make this document a proposal would be to add elements that ask management for approval for you to go ahead with the project. Certainly, some proposals must sell the projects they offer to do, but in all cases, proposals must sell the writer (or the writer's organization) as the one to do the project.

Types of proposals.

Consider the situations in which proposals occur.

Sometimes proposals origniate through a formal process. A company may send out a public announcement requesting proposals for a specific project. This public announcement—called a **request for proposals (RFP)**—could be issued through newspapers, trade journals, Chamber of Commerce channels, or individual letters. Firms or individuals interested in the project would then write proposals in which they summarize their qualifications, describe schedules and costs, and discuss their approaches to the project. The recipient of all these proposals would then evaluate them, select the best candidate, and then work up a contract.

But proposals also come about much less formally. Imagine that you are interested in doing a project at work (for example, investigating the merits of bringing in some new technology to increase productivity). Imagine that you visited with your supervisor and tried to convince her to buy the new technology. She might respond by saying, "I like your idea, but I can't approve a purchase that large. Write me a proposal. I'll present it to upper management." You would then write a proposal in which you describe the problem, explain why it needs to be solved, introduce your intended solution, describe schedules and costs, and ask for permission to bring in the new technology. Your supervisor would then forward the proposal to upper management, who would either deny the request or release funds to make the project happen.

As you can see from these examples, proposals can be divided into several categories:

- *Internal / External*. A proposal to someone within your organization (a business, a government agency, etc.) is an internal proposal. With internal proposals, you might omit certain sections (such as qualifications) or not need to include as much information in them. An external proposal is one written from a separate, independent organization or individual to another such entity. The typical example is an independent consultant proposing to do a project for another firm.
- *Solicited / Unsolicited*. A proposal that comes in response to an RFP is a solicited proposal. Typically, a company will send out RFPs through the mail or publish them in some news source. But proposals can be solicited in person, as well. For example, if you are explaining to your boss what a great thing it would be to install a new

technology in the office, your boss might get interested and ask you to write up a proposal that offered to do a formal study of the idea. An unsolicited proposal comes even though the recipient has not requested proposals. With unsolicited proposals, you sometimes must convince the recipient that a problem or need exists before you can begin the main part of the proposal.

- *Research / Goods-and-services.* A research proposal is one in which the recipient requests permission or funding (and sometimes both) to study something and write a report about the findings. A goods-and-services proposal is a classic business-type proposal, in which one party offers to sell a product or service to another party.

Format of Proposals

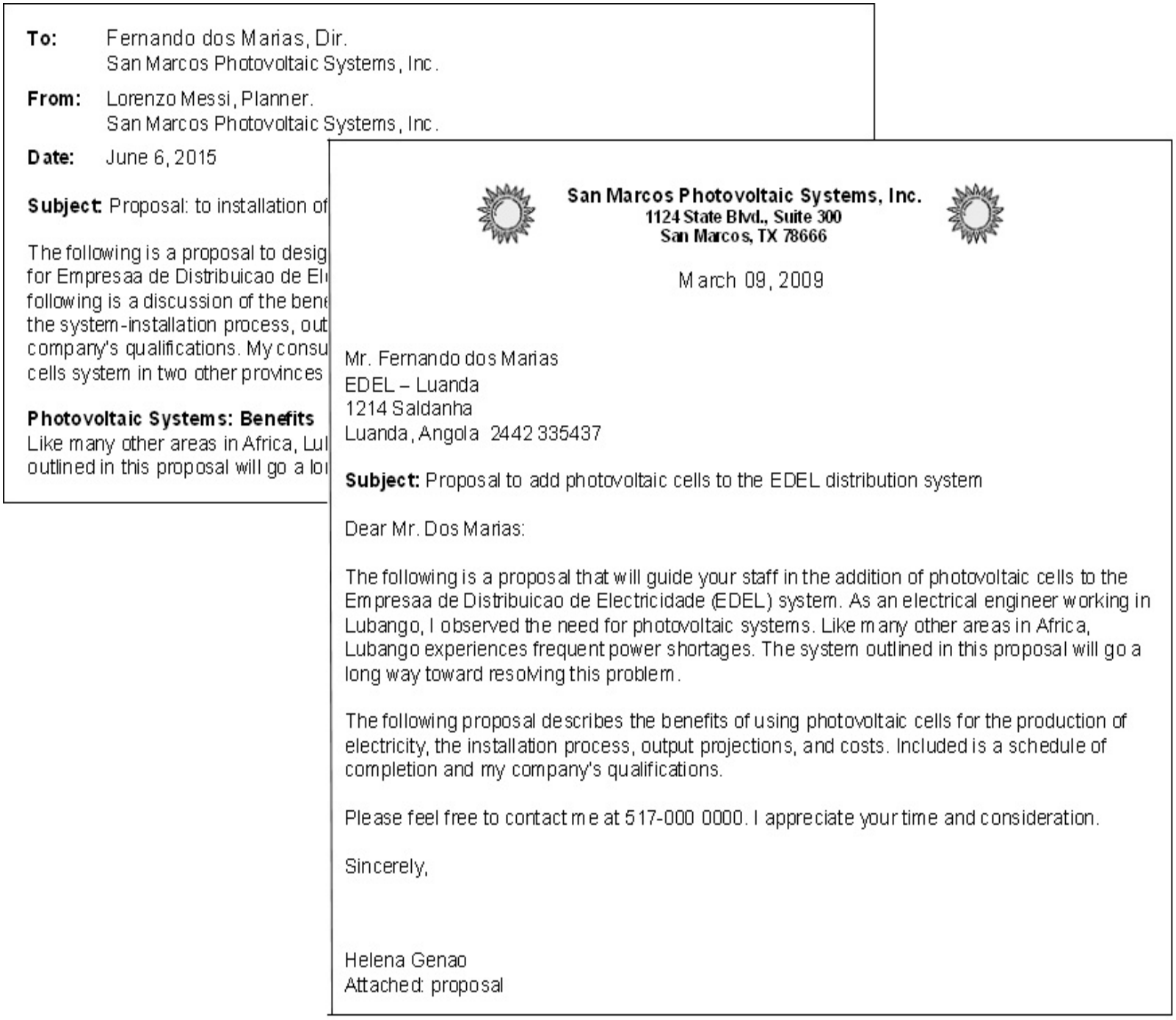
You have many options for the format and packaging of your proposal. Two of the most common formats are listed here.

Cover letter or memo with separate proposal.

In this format, you send a cover letter or cover memo along with the proposal, but the letter or memo does *not* appear inside the proposal's main body. They are distinct documents, and the letter or memo should follow standard professional format. If the proposal is printed in hard copy, the letter or memo is often paper-clipped to the front cover.

Consolidated business-letter or memo proposal.

In this format, you consolidate the entire proposal within a standard business letter or memo. You include headings and other special formatting elements as if it were a larger, formal document. (This consolidated memo format is illustrated in the left portion of the following illustration.) Use the memorandum format for internal proposals and the business-letter format for external proposals.



To: Fernando dos Marias, Dir.
San Marcos Photovoltaic Systems, Inc.

From: Lorenzo Messi, Planner.
San Marcos Photovoltaic Systems, Inc.

Date: June 6, 2015

Subject: Proposal: to installation of

The following is a proposal to desig
for Empresaa de Distribuicao de El
following is a discussion of the bene
the system-installation process, out
company's qualifications. My consu
cells system in two other provinces

Photovoltaic Systems: Benefits
Like many other areas in Africa, Lul
outlined in this proposal will go a lo

San Marcos Photovoltaic Systems, Inc.
1124 State Blvd., Suite 300
San Marcos, TX 78666

March 09, 2009

Mr. Fernando dos Marias
EDEL – Luanda
1214 Saldanha
Luanda, Angola 2442 335437

Subject: Proposal to add photovoltaic cells to the EDEL distribution system

Dear Mr. Dos Marias:

The following is a proposal that will guide your staff in the addition of photovoltaic cells to the Empresaa de Distribuicao de Electricidade (EDEL) system. As an electrical engineer working in Lubango, I observed the need for photovoltaic systems. Like many other areas in Africa, Lubango experiences frequent power shortages. The system outlined in this proposal will go a long way toward resolving this problem.

The following proposal describes the benefits of using photovoltaic cells for the production of electricity, the installation process, output projections, and costs. Included is a schedule of completion and my company's qualifications.

Please feel free to contact me at 517-000 0000. I appreciate your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Helena Genao
Attached: proposal

Proposal that uses the consolidated memo format (left) and a proposal that is separate from its cover letter (right)

Sexy Technical Communication Home

Common Proposal Structure

The following is an outline of the internal structure you'll commonly find in proposals. It is not an absolute structure, so you can reorganize, cut, or add sections as necessary, but it is the most common sequence and should serve you well as a basic framework, whether your proposal is a single page or a multi-volume stack of bound paper.

Front Matter

Cover letter. A proposal that is longer than a few pages often contains a brief "cover" letter or memo (depending on if the proposal is external or internal, respectively) that is paper-clipped to the proposal itself. This cover letter or memo briefly announces that a proposal follows and outlines its contents. In fact, the contents of the cover letter or memo are pretty much a condensed version of the introduction section. This redundant content is because the letter or memo may get detached from the proposal, or the recipient may not even bother to look at the letter or memo and just dive right into the proposal itself.

Binding, section tabs, cover, label. Consider packaging the document in a professional-looking way, especially if you are preparing an external proposal in hard copy. Use a spiral or comb binding, insert tabs for major sections (on long proposals; short documents are easily navigable without tabs), and prepare a label for the cover that includes at least these four pieces of information:

- the proposal's formal title
- the intended recipient
- the authors (or, often, the authors' organization)
- the date of submission

Title page. A proposal that is longer than a few pages usually includes a title page. On this page, you should include the same basic information that appears on a cover label. You may also wish to include a descriptive abstract at the bottom. (See the next section, Abstract / Executive summary.)

Do not include a running header or page number on a title page.

Abstract / Executive summary. These two elements are superficially similar, but they serve different purposes. An abstract is a capsule summary of the proposal's high points; it's usually a single paragraph, and its purpose is to clue a reader in to the document's purpose and general contents. An executive summary is a more-detailed summary that includes all the important points in the proposal; it will contain multiple paragraphs and is significantly longer than an abstract, and its purpose is to allow a busy executive to decide whether reading the entire proposal is worthwhile.

Long proposals may contain both an abstract and an executive summary. Short proposals most likely contain an abstract but no executive summary.

There is no hard limit on an executive summary section's length; it can vary from a half-page to as long as needed. On a very long and complex proposal (for example, a proposal written for the federal government about a multi-billion dollar project), the executive summary can be a short book. However, a good rule of thumb is to limit an executive summary to two pages.

Table of contents. Any technical document of more than a few pages that includes distinct

major sections should include a table of contents (ToC), and each major section should start on a new page.

The number of subheading levels you include in the ToC is up to you. A long, complex proposal with multiple subheadings may be more navigable if every subheading has its own ToC entry, but a relatively short proposal may only need its major headings to appear in the ToC.

The ToC should not include the title page or the cover letter/memo. If the proposal includes an abstract and/or executive summary, those sections should appear in the ToC, and it is customary to paginate them with lower-case roman numerals. The ToC should not include itself. Treat it as page zero.

Table of figures. If your proposal contains more than one figure or table, list them in a table of figures (ToF), sometimes called a "list of figures."

Please note that tables and figures are different things. Strictly speaking, figures are illustrations, drawings, photographs, graphs, and charts. Tables are rows and columns of words and numbers; they are not considered figures.

For longer reports that contain multiple figures and tables, create separate lists for each. Put them on a separate page from the ToC, but put them together on the same page if they fit. You can identify the lists separately, as Table of Figures and Table of Tables.

Main Body

Introduction. Plan the introduction to your proposal carefully. Make sure it does all of the following things (but not necessarily in this order) that apply to your particular proposal:

- Indicate that the following document is a proposal.
- Refer to some previous contact with the recipient of the proposal or to your source of information about the project.
- Include one brief motivating statement that will encourage the recipient to read beyond the introduction and to both consider doing your project (if it's an unsolicited or competitive proposal) and consider hiring you to do the project.
- Give an overview of the proposal's contents.

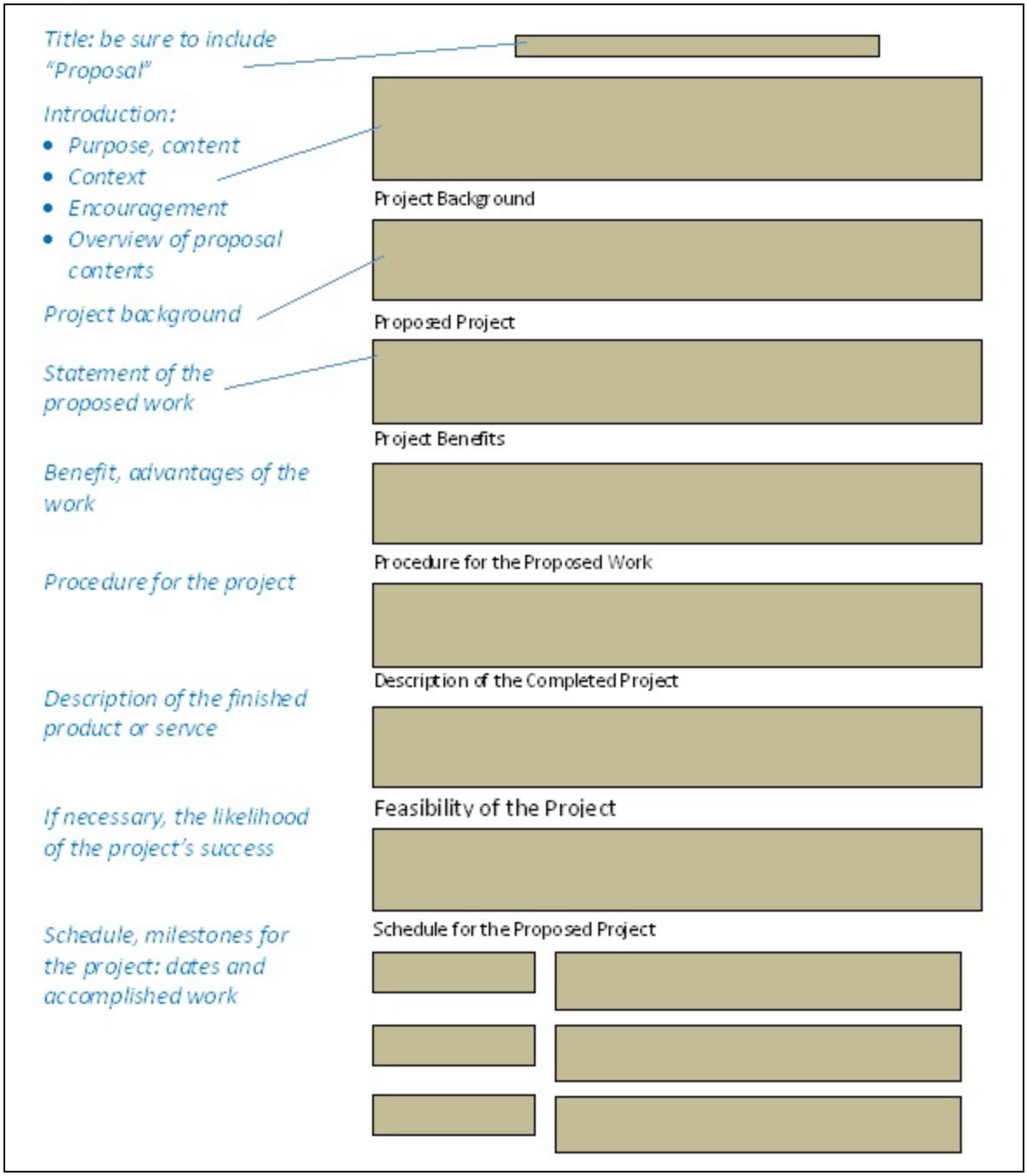
Take a look at the introductions in the first two example proposals listed at the beginning of this chapter, and try to identify these elements.

Background on the problem, opportunity, or situation. The background section discusses why the project is necessary or desirable—what problem exists, what opportunity there is for improving things, and/or what the basic situation is. For example, managers of a chain of daycare centers may need to meet state licensing requirements by

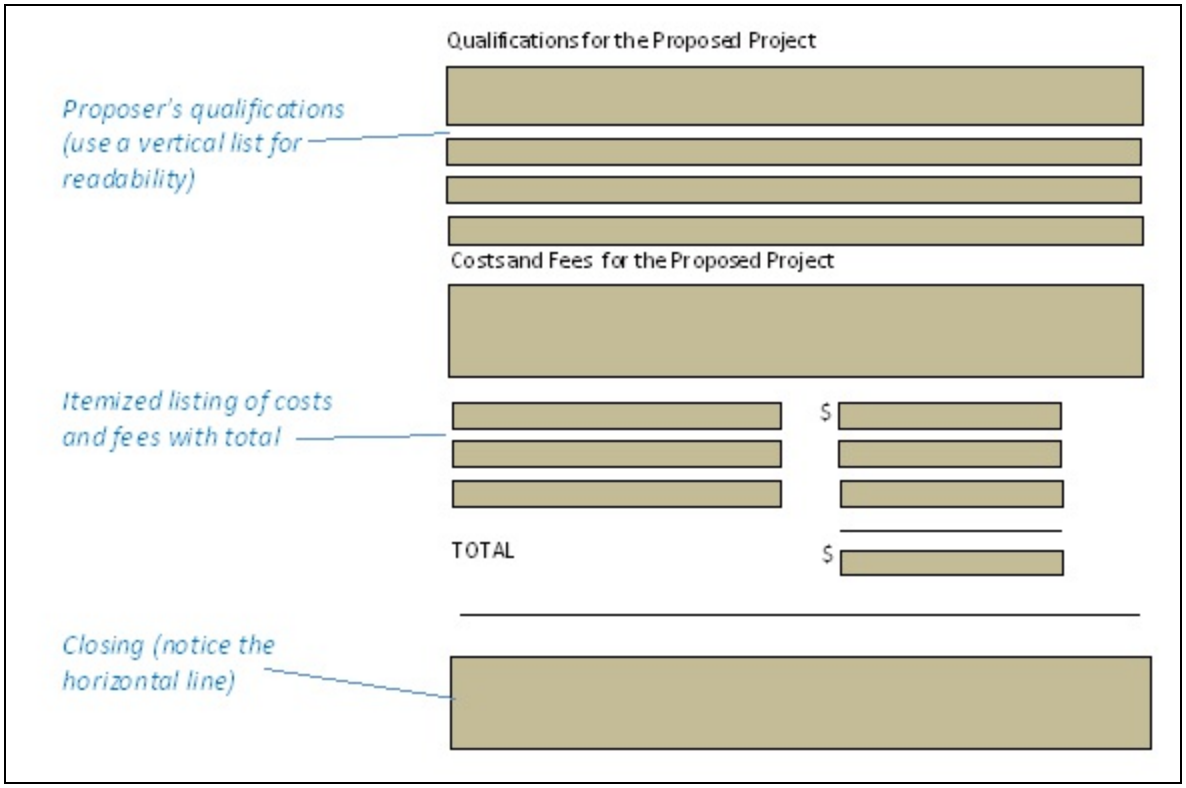
ensuring that all employees know CPR. An owner of pine timber land in east Texas may want to harvest saleable timber without destroying the local ecosystem.

If your proposal's audience knows the problem very well, this section might not be needed. Writing the background section still might be useful, however, in demonstrating your particular view of the problem. And, if the the proposal is unsolicited, a background section is almost a requirement—you will probably need to convince the audience that a problem or opportunity exists and that it should be addressed.

Benefits and feasibility of the proposed project. Most proposals discuss the advantages or benefits of doing the proposed project. This section acts as an argument in favor of approving the project. Also, some proposals discuss the likelihood of the project's success. In the forestry proposal, the proposer recommends that the landowner make an investment; at the end of the proposal, he explores the question of the potential return on that investment. In an unsolicited proposal, this section is particularly important—you are trying to "sell" the audience on the project.



Schematic view of proposals



Schematic view of proposals—continued

Description of the deliverable (results of the project). Most proposals need to describe the deliverable—the finished product that the audience will receive after hiring you to complete the project. If you are writing a research proposal, the deliverable will be a report. If you are writing a goods-and-services proposal, the deliverable will be an object or action.

Method, procedure, theory. In some proposals, you'll want to explain how you'll go about doing the proposed work. This section acts as an additional persuasive element; it shows the audience you have a sound, well-thought-out approach to the project. Also, it serves as the other form of background some proposals need. Remember that the background section (the one discussed above) focused on describing the problem or need that brings about the proposal. However, in this section, you discuss the technical background relating to the procedures or technology you plan to use in the proposed work. For example, in the forestry proposal, the writer gives a bit of background on how timber management is done. Once again, this section gives you, the proposal writer, a chance to show that you know what you are talking about and to build confidence in the audience.

Schedule. Most proposals contain a section that shows not only the projected completion date but also key milestones for the project. If you are doing a large project spreading over many months, the timeline would also show dates on which you would deliver progress reports. If you can't cite specific dates, cite amounts of time for each phase of the project.

If you are writing a research proposal about a potential project, you should divide the Schedule section into two separate parts. One subsection should address the schedule for researching and writing the report. The other subsection should address (at least in general terms) the schedule for the major project that you are researching. For example, in the

forestry proposal, the timber land owner would have two major questions about time: when would your report arrive, and how long would it take to harvest the pine timber in an ecologically responsible way? You'd need to address both these questions in the Schedule section, but you'd need to keep them in separate subsections.

Costs, resources required. Most proposals also contain a section detailing the costs of the project, whether internal or external. With external projects, you may need to list your hourly rates, projected hours, costs of equipment and supplies, and so forth, and then calculate the total cost of the complete project. For internal projects, you will still need to list the project costs: for example, hours you will need to complete the project, equipment and supplies you'll be using, assistance from other people in the organization, and so on.

If you are writing a research proposal about a potential project, you should divide the costs/resources section into two separate parts, just like the schedule section. One subsection should address the costs for researching and writing the report. The other subsection should list the costs and necessary resources (or at least reasonable estimates of them) for the major project you are researching. Again with the forestry example, the timber land owner would want to know how much you'd charge to research and write a report about eco-friendly ways of logging his land. Likewise, the land's owner would want to know that he can afford the ecologically-sound logging project. If harvesting the timber in the most eco-friendly way will cause him to go broke, there's no point in hiring you in the first place. You need to address both these issues in the costs-and-resources section, but keep them in separate subsections.

Qualifications. Most proposals contain a summary of the proposing individual's or organization's qualifications to do the proposed work. It's like a mini-résumé contained in the proposal. The proposal audience uses it to decide whether you are suited for the project. Therefore, this section lists work experience, similar projects, references, training, and education that shows familiarity with the project.

Conclusions. The final major section of the proposal should do two things:

- refocus the audience's attention on the positive aspects of the project
- urge the audience to contact you with their approval

You can also encourage the audience to get in touch to work out the details of the project, remind them of the project's benefits, and put in one last plug for you or your organization as the right choice for the project.

Back Matter

Appendices. An appendix is an "extra" section that appears after the proposal's main body. Any useful content that you feel is too large for the main part of the proposal or that you think would be distracting and interrupt the flow of the proposal should go into an appendix.

Common examples of appendix-appropriate material are large tables of data, big chunks of sample code, fold-out maps, background that is too basic or too advanced for the body of the report, or large illustrations that just do not fit in the main body.

Use separate appendices for each item or category of items, and label each one alphabetically, as "Appendix A: (descriptive title of contents)" and so on. If you've got only one appendix, continue the proposal's page numbering scheme. If you have multiple appendices, you can number each appendix's pages separately, as A-1, A-2, and so on.

Glossary. It's always a good idea to define specialized terms in the document's main text, but if your proposal contains a significant number of terms that are unfamiliar to your audience, you may need to include a glossary.

Index. Long, complex proposals may need to include an index so that readers can find the specific word or topic that interests them.

Information sources. If your proposal quotes, paraphrases, or summarizes information that came from outside sources, cite the sources appropriately in the main text and include bibliographic information in a separate section at the proposal's end. Use whatever citation format is appropriate for your audience's profession and field. Common formats include IEEE, MLA, APA, CSE, Chicago, and Turabian.

Proposal Pre-writing Strategy

When you develop a proposal, go through this checklist and think about these issues. Make a list of your thoughts on them so you (and if you are working in a group, all your coworkers) have a master document you can refer back to.

Audience. Describe the intended audience of the proposal and the proposed report (they may be different) in terms of the organization they work for, their titles and jobs, their technical background, their ability to understand the report you propose to write.

Situation. Describe the situation in which the proposal is written and in which the project is needed: what problems or needs are there? who has them, where are they located?

Deliverable type. Describe the deliverable that you are proposing. If you are writing a research proposal, will you give your client a a technical background report? a recommendation report? a feasibility report? If you are writing a goods-and-services proposal, what object or service will you provide?

Information sources. If you are writing a research proposal, make sure you know that there is adequate information for your topic. List specific books, articles, reference works, interview subjects, field observations, and other kinds of sources that you think will

contribute to your report.

Graphics. List the graphics you think your report will need according to their type and their content. Odds are, you'll need at least one figure or table.