



Who? What? Where? When? Why? Proposal Writing for Business Made Easy – Really!

by Karen Kanakanui

Has this happened to you? You're talking to a prospective client and everything's going great. They're very receptive to what you're saying and then they say, "Sounds good. Can you send me a proposal?" Thud! Many people dread hearing those words because they don't know how to write a proposal. It's a necessary part of being in business, though, and the good news is, it's not that hard to do!

I have worked with different formats and styles over the years, written pages and pages defining the problem, solving the problem, and budgeting the solution. Effective enough, but very time-consuming to write, and equally time-consuming to read. I have a new way of writing proposals these days which I like a lot. It's based on the journalism basic principle of answering the questions "who, what, where, when, why and how" and what it does is help you craft a proposal that fits on no more than two pages. Really!

The process is fairly straightforward, and what it teaches you to do is create a short, powerful proposal that covers all the important points, but not one sentence more. You also learn to put yourself in the mind of the decision maker who will read your proposal and speak directly to him or her. (Hmmm, sounds just like marketing!)

I'm a firm believer in keeping proposals to about one page. We live in an information-overload society, and most key decision makers - which is who you want to reach with your proposal, right? - don't have time to read 50 pages of charts, graphics, justifications, costs, etc.

A benefit of producing a shorter proposal is that creating a proposal that is "complete" on one-to-two pages (or about 400-500 words) makes you focus on your key points:

- what the proposal will accomplish,
- why it's necessary,
- how much it costs,
- who's involved, and
- what you want the reader to do next.

And that's really all you need!



“What” – The purpose for the proposal

Let's look at the "**what** the proposal will accomplish" section, which can be as short as one sentence. Here are a few examples:

To create an informational brochure for prospective clients that shares the benefits of coaching in a simple, visitor-friendly, way.

To capture the visitor's attention on _____ home page and encourage them to take a next step: join the coach's newsletter, click to sign-up for teleclasses, buy coaching services.

To create an exciting, informative, and powerful business educational event to attract successful executives to _____. To enhance further the usefulness of the event by offering free 15-minute mini-consultation sessions, provided by _____.

So that's the first step - see how it works? In this section, we've said what we're going to do, what we're proposing. Next, we'll look at the next step - why this task or project is needed - the justification for the proposal.

“Why” - The heart of the proposal

Remember, our goal is to have the proposal fit on one or two pages, so you really only have a few paragraphs to cover these three points:

- 1) state the problem – **why** is the proposal necessary,
- 2) present a proposed solution to the problem – **how** and **where** will it be solved, and
- 3) indicate why you're the best person or company to solve the problem (that's the "**who**" section!).

You want to define the problem/challenge as succinctly as possible. This is really the key section of the proposal and this is where your proposal must really shine! For example, in a proposal for a newsletter, I might start by writing what the company is currently doing and touch on changes they might consider to make it more effective. I will stress the benefits to the client of producing their newsletter.

And if I can identify the challenges they're currently having in producing one, I'll do so. If you've already met with a client ahead of time, this is the section where you let them know you heard and understood their requirements. If you haven't met with the client first, you will need to do enough research to be able to make educated guesses as to the benefits they will enjoy. The key point is this: You have to say something here that strikes a chord with the reader - "Yes, that's absolutely right." In the "present a solution" paragraph, simply state what you're going to do: "Words Are Us proposes to produce a 10-page newsletter, etc." I usually include the specs here: Is it color or b/w? Monthly, quarterly, yearly? Online or print?



The final goal of this section is to let the reader know that you can fulfill the terms of the proposal. You can accomplish this without saying much - or anything - about your credentials. Sometimes, if I'm writing a proposal for a client, I may use a one or two-word phrase to describe credentials, for example:

"Marketing coach _____ proposes" or

"Professional speaker _____ proposes."

It's certainly okay to say something - briefly - about your credentials or background, but I find that what really "sells" this section is when the client can tell I've "heard" their pain and am providing a solution. The information you provide in this section, the way you set out the problem and offer a way to solve it, provides its own credibility.

Finishing off with a bang!

Now it's time to add three more sections to complete your proposal with a strong finish. The three remaining parts of your proposal are the financials, current status, and the call-to-action. These sections, although short, are critical to a strong close for your proposal.

More "What" and "Who" - The financial section

The financial section simply states what the costs are and who's responsible for what. Are there consulting fees involved, production costs, marketing fees? Will the costs be borne by one company or shared? Are you bartering your services in exchange for some type of promotional consideration? This is the place for all this. When I put together proposals to provide writing services, I usually include the number of revisions included in the price.

"When" – The current status

In the status section – the "when" section - you're spelling out the state of the deal at this point in time. If there are contingencies that need to be considered before a project can start, talk about them here. If you provide services, and someone asks you for a proposal at a time when you've got other commitments, you might say that you are willing to offer services beginning after a specific date. And it's enough to say in this section, "YourName is ready to begin YourServices upon acceptance of this proposal."

"What" next – the call to action

The final section, and by the way, **without this step, you do not have a proposal**, is the call to action, or the "what's next." I think the most important part of this section is that you ask for what you want, whether it's resources, dollars, time, etc. You may think the person reading the proposal is going to know how you want them to help, but don't leave it to chance. Ask! And be sure it's something your reader can give you - do enough research to be sure that you're asking the right person.



This section might also include the best way and times to contact you. Sign and date your proposal, and you're ready to go.

Putting it all together

Now that you know what needs to be included in a proposal, let's look at the structure. I start off with a title that's simple and descriptive: "New website for _____," "Newsletter for _____," etc. If I want to say more, I'll add a subtitle that is an entire sentence: "New web copy for _____ that conveys the excitement, value, and quality of the products in the _____ line."

This is followed by the purpose for the proposal, the "what," and the justification for the proposal – the "why." You can either title these sections – I sometimes use "Target" for the "what" – or just use regular paragraph formatting.

I use these titles for the remaining sections:

- "Financials" for the financial details,
- "Status" for the current state of the proposal, and
- "Action" for the call-to-action section.

Business proposal writing is a fact-of-life for business owners. This approach to writing persuasive proposals covers what needs to be covered - and no more – and it can be completed on one or two pages. And for a busy executive who's faced with a pile of proposals, this format makes your proposal get noticed and read!

The feedback my clients provide me on this approach is amazement that their proposal can be captured in this simple format - and then "thanks" when their proposals are accepted!

HIP HIP! Thanks, Karen, for taking my thoughts and words and creating a proposal to help me teach classes. That proposal has been accepted by a few nationwide, multi-million dollar corporations, and even two not-for-profits. It's great to have a single document that I can use over and over again – in fact I've used it for more than 50 proposals in the last six months! Maria Marsala, Poulsbo, WA, Business Consultant and Coach, www.ElevatingYourBusiness.com

Of course, the format only works when you cover all the main points - make sure you're giving the decision maker all the information they need to make an informed decision. And you can use the proposal over and over again to move your business forward. So remember - think in terms of answering the questions who, what, where, when, why and how - and you will be well on your way to creating a successful proposal. Good luck!