

Tips on Writing a Competitive Grant Proposal

Thanks for choosing to apply for a Western SARE grant. Your application will compete with others for the funds that Congress will allocate this year. To help you put your best grant-writing foot forward, we offer the following suggestions.

Naturally, the substance of your idea or concept carries the greatest weight. But how you present that idea or concept in writing can influence the review panel's decision. A poorly written application raises a red flag. Try to think like a member of the review panel. Ask yourself, "How would I rate this application?" Remember, the panel includes a wide range of people with a wide range of backgrounds. A typical review panel might include a Utah organic hay and barley grower, a rancher from Colorado, a conservationist with the Washington Natural Resources Conservation Service, a soil scientist from Arizona State University and an agricultural specialist with EPA.

- First and foremost, follow the instructions in the request for applications. Many applications die because the author failed to read and follow the instructions. The instructions are a blueprint for building your proposal. Failing to follow the blueprint will yield a tumbledown application.
- Good writing is an extension of clear thinking. Clear thinking often comes from an outline of your thoughts. For each section of your grant application, start with an outline. Writing from an outline helps you:
 - preserve the logic of your message
 - identify your main ideas
 - discipline your writing
 - maintain continuity
 - avoid getting off track
 - point out omissions
- Write a draft. Then put it aside for a day or two. Rereading your own words after setting the document aside for a few days permits a fresh approach. The best authors often rewrite their words dozens of times to make sure their meaning is clear.
- Find some editors – at least three of them. You needn't look far. 1) Start with your family. Bribe them if you have to. Ask them to read your application and circle anything they don't understand. Then go back, figure out why they're confused and write away the confusion. 2) Find a farmer or rancher. If anybody can find the weak spots in your application, a steward of land and resources can. 3) Run the proposal by a scientist – an extension agent or specialist, an NRCS conservationist – somebody who can see your application from a technical angle. Remember,

every best-selling author has an editor. Having several editors can only make your application better, and more competitive.

- Read aloud what you wrote. This enables you to see – and hear – the faults that you could have sworn weren't there in the first place. Trust your gut. If your instincts tell you something doesn't quite sound right, it probably isn't. If you use a word processor, don't rely on spell check or grammar check.
- If you're not sure how to spell a word, get a dictionary.
- Keep your sentences short. Sentences should vary in length to avoid boring the reader. But the average sentence length should be short – 15 to 20 words per sentence.
- When you write, use simple, familiar words. Ten short words – the, of, and, to, a, in, that, it, is, I – make up 25% of all that is written and spoken in English. The 50 words most often used make up 50% and the 1,000 most frequently used words make up 80%.
- Avoid jargon and acronyms. They can confuse and slow down the reader. Jargon is "insider" talk used in science, trades or professions that "outsiders" may not understand. Acronyms, made from the first letters of words in organizations like EPA or USDA, can also confuse readers unless the acronyms are commonly used.
- In conversation, you have a chance to explain yourself, depending, of course, on whom you're conversing with. You can clarify confusions. In writing, you have only one chance to get your message across.
- Use nouns and strong verbs, and be specific. Note the verbs in these examples – monitor, analyze, measure, determine:
 - "The project team will monitor insects at four test sites once a week for 12 weeks."
 - "At the end of the project, I will analyze the soil and measure tree diameter."
 - "This project will determine the optimum stocking rates and intensive rotations for producing pastured pork."
- Use the active voice and avoid the passive voice. The active is more forceful and easier to understand. The three examples above use the active voice. The examples below use the passive:
 - "Insects will be monitored by the project team at four test sites once a week for 12 weeks."
 - "At the end of the project, the soil be analyzed and the tree diameters will be measured by me."
 - "The optimum stocking rates and intensive rotations for producing pastured pork will be determined by the project when it is completed."

William Strunk Jr., author of "The Elements of Style," sums up good writing this way: "Vigorous writing is concise. A sentence should contain no unnecessary words, a paragraph no unnecessary sentences, for the same reason that a drawing should have no unnecessary lines and a machine no unnecessary parts. This requires not that the writer

make all of his sentences short, or that he avoid all detail and treat his subjects only in outline, but that every word tell.”

A Few Helpful Hints for Writing Applications

Sometimes, our words convey other than what we intended. For example, from a church newsletter ad:

The ladies of the Church have cast off clothing of every kind. They may be seen in the basement on Friday afternoon.

We rarely see such humorous, unintended distortions in SARE applications. But occasional mistakes often confound the meaning. Our review of grant applications and reports submitted in the past year found these unintended errors:

- Instead of chaff, the author wrote chafe.
- Bare turned out as bear.
- Farming became fanning.

We in agriculture sometimes chafe at the hard work. Indeed, it's a bear of a job. And fanning, as in a soft breeze, may seem like a preferable alternative. A few minutes spent reading over your application can catch mistakes like using coarse instead of course, plating instead of planting, night instead of right, bad instead of had and arc instead of are. Spell check would not have found any of these mistakes - only a careful reader.

Misused words are but the tip of the editing iceberg. For your convenience, we've compiled a list of frequently misused words or phrases, mined from SARE applications reports and common to many. The answers to many of these questions are in the dictionary. We, and many other style manuals, recommend Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary.

- Internet, upper case
- website, one word, lower case; (it can also be used as Web site; just be consistent)
- email, one word, no hyphen
- data is plural, for example, the data are correct; datum is the singular
- database is one word
- PowerPoint is a registered trade name with upper case p's
- summer, spring, fall and winter are lower case
- groundwater, aboveground and belowground are all one word
- fact sheet is two words
- % or percent, either is okay, just be consistent

- online, one word
- use toward, not towards, which is British
- a compliment expresses esteem, complement fills up or completes
- it's is a contraction for it is or it has, its is the agent or object of an action
- affect, a verb, is to influence; effect as a verb means to bring about or execute; as a noun, the more common usage, effect means result
- break even is two words as a noun, it is hyphenated as an adjective – the business will break even; it hit the break-even point last year
- overwinter, one word, to survive the winter

Hyphens

Hyphens probably give writers more trouble than about anything else. Misuse can change meaning. Remember the ladies at the church and their “cast off clothing.” Had it said, “The ladies of the Church have cast-off clothing of every kind...” with cast-off becoming a hyphenated compound modifier instead of an active verb, the clothing, and not the undressed ladies, would have been on view in the basement of the church. Is it follow up, follow-up or followup? Consulting the dictionary can give you answer to this and other questions regarding hyphens. Also, consider these thoughts on hyphens:

- Theodore Bernstein in *The Careful Writer* notes that rules guiding hyphens are populated with exceptions, so hyphen use is often left to the judgment of the writer. His advice: Use hyphens only as needed to clarify meaning.
- Use a hyphen or hyphens when a phrase used as an adjective modifies a noun. For instance, grower-oriented symposium or year-to-year differences.
- Do not use a hyphen in a compound modifier using an adverb ending in -ly. For example, environmentally sound practices or widely used test.
- Avoid hyphens in the use of chemical terms, such as sodium chloride solution.

Here are examples of hyphens, used correctly here, from Western SARE reports:

- season-long experiments
- late-season reduction
- site-specific management
- value-added marketing

- hands-on experience
- small- to medium-scale project
- three-year project
- two-day seminar
- 1,300-foot-long hedgerow
- drought-resistant cultivar

Abbreviations

Overuse of abbreviations can be confusing to readers unfamiliar with your subject. Try to avoid abbreviations. Their use may save space but retard comprehension. Abbreviations, meanwhile, can be useful with measures. Just be consistent. Some common examples:

ac for acre

ha for hectare

lb for pound

oz for ounce

ft for foot

in for inch

bu for bushel

p for pint

q for quart

mm for millimeter

cm for centimeter

m for meter

km for kilometer

cc for cubic centimeter

l for liter

approx for approximate

< for less than

>for greater than

C for Celsius

Fahr for Fahrenheit

Abbreviations for chemicals are also useful, including N for nitrogen, P for phosphorus and K for potassium.

When in doubt, avoid abbreviations, unless they are universally understood and accepted, like USDA for the U.S. Department of Agriculture, EPA for the Environmental Protection Agency and SARE for the Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education program. By the way, we prefer the use of Western SARE as opposed to WSARE. Here are a few more to keep in mind:

- Use United States as a noun, U.S. as an adjective. Avoid US or USA.
- The use of state abbreviations is trending toward two capital letters – CO for Colorado, HI for Hawaii etc. In naming places, it's okay to use the traditional style, Davis, Calif., or Davis, CA. Choose a style and stick with it.
- Months of the year should be spelled out when they stand alone in a sentence. In a date, they can be spelled out or abbreviated: Jan. 1, 2007, or January 1, 2007. Just be consistent.
- Days of the week are typically spelled out.

Capitalization

In general, avoid unnecessary capitalization. Consider these guidelines:

- Capitalize proper nouns.
- Capitalize the first word in a complete sentence.
- Capitalize the major words in titles, books and articles. Conjunctions, articles and prepositions are not considered major words.
- Capitalize extension when it's part of an official name (Utah State University Cooperative Extension Service). Otherwise, lowercase (the extension agent ran). Likewise, do not capitalize Federal unless it is part of an official name (Federal Bureau of Investigation).
- Capitalize nouns followed by numbers or letters that are part of a series (Experiment 4, Plot 7, Table 3, Group B)

Punctuation

Punctuation marks are the signposts for your readers, directing their path through your application. Bad punctuation can change meaning or cause readers to lose direction – and interest – in your application.

- Commas in a series, as in wheat, barley and oats. The comma before and may be excluded, as shown, or included, as in wheat, barley, and oats. Settle on one style and stick with it.
- Commas and periods always go inside quotation marks – “I like SARE.”
- The colon is typically used at the end of a sentence to introduce lists, tabulations, etc. Capitalize the first word after a colon only if it is a proper noun or begins a complete sentence.

Numbers

Numbers are frequently used – and misused – in Western SARE applications and reports. Guidelines for number usage can vary widely. As suggested above, your application will be better understood if you adopt a style for using numbers and stick with it. Here are some options that you may want to consider:

- In general, use words for numbers zero through nine and numbers for 10 and above. As an exception to this guideline, use numbers for measures. Measures include weight, volume, distance and size.
- When using numerals over 999, it’s preferable to use a comma after the first digit, for example, 5,427 instead of 5427.
- When using numbers less than 1, it’s preferable to use a zero before the decimal point, for example, 0.137 instead of .137.
- Use numerals when the numbers represent ratios (a ratio of 4:1), percentages (33%), fractions (1/3 of a pint), decimals (0.33 of the total) or mathematical functions (multiplied by 4).
- When a number begins a sentence, use words. Four men came. Fifty-five rows were weeded (note that fifty-five is hyphenated).
- With numbered plots, samples, experiments, etc., use numeral and capitalize the noun, for example, Plot 7, Sample 4, Experiment 1.
- To form the plurals of numbers, add s or es without an apostrophe, for example, eights and sixes, 1950s, 10s and 30s.
- There is no need to express a number twice, as in one (1) per person.

This is not meant to be a complete writing guide, just some thoughts on the most frequently noted writing missteps found in Western SARE applications and reports over the last couple of years. Contact [Stacie Clary](#), Western SARE communications specialist, with your questions about writing your proposals or grants.