

Complex Proposal Development Best Practices

Introduction

As grant application requirements become increasingly complex, and teams pursuing funding become increasingly diverse, the need for thoroughly planning the proposal development process is critical. Developing a plan will ensure your proposal is complete, compelling and competitive, and will enable your team to use its time efficiently. A well thought out proposal development team will keep those involved on track, on time and accountable.

This document discusses best practices in applying planning tools and management processes for teams producing a competitive complex proposal. The tools and templates we provide have been developed and refined over a two-year pilot project, funded by the Vice Provost of Research. The tools we discuss have been used in projects as large as \$90 million with 20 PIs all the way down to small but complex proposals with 1 PI and a \$5 million dollar request. Every project these tools have been applied to has been rated by clients as a more efficient and less painful project resulting in a higher quality proposal. The project management tools provided here are primarily aimed at the development of large, multiple-PI, multidisciplinary proposals at the University of Washington. However, the best practices contained here may be used to increase the efficiency of any proposal development effort.

Using this Website and the Resources

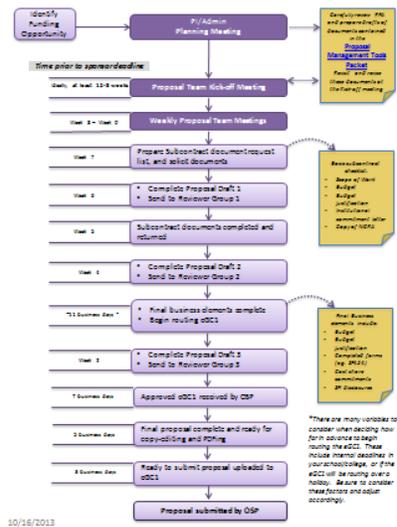
The Office of Research is willing to provide a free one hour consultation on using the tools in this website to help guide complex proposal development. The consultation will be provided after a PI has gained approval from the department Chair to pursue the funding opportunity in question. If you would like to consult with the Office of Research, please ask your approving chair to submit an email to research@uw.edu? We will contact you after that time to set up a meeting.

It's a good idea to read through the entire document to get a good overview of the process and tools available. Or, if you're looking for specific tool or template, you can use the menu *(where? At the right in the resource box?)* to find the exact item you need right now.

The following graphic provides an overview of the timeline you should anticipate for the development of a quality proposal. Each section in the graphic is linked to an explanation of the step and specific tools or templates applicable to that part of the development process.

Proposal Development Timeline Overview

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➤ Go/No-Go Decision Matrix

Assuming you’ve already identified a funding **opportunity (link to the researcher’s guide section on this here?)**, the next step is to decide if it’s worth pursuing. The Go/No-Go Decision Matrix provides a set of strategic criteria to be used in making a decision about whether to pursue a funding opportunity.

When determining the likelihood of “success” however, this should not be measured on an outcome of receiving funding alone. Developing an interdisciplinary proposal is a unique opportunity for innovation and an exchange of ideas that could provide the seed for future successful collaborations.

➤ PI/Admin Planning Meeting

Once the decision is made to go forward, the next step should be to prepare a draft proposal development plan. In our experience, it is best to develop the first draft in an initial planning meeting between the lead Principle Investigator and that PI’s primary administrative support. The key components of this plan are the 1) Timeline/Calendar/Work plan 2) RFA Table of Contents 3) Roles document 4) Review cycle document. These are all communication documents that when completed, are best kept in a folder that can be shared by the entire proposal development team such as Dropbox.

➤ Proposal Development Project Management Tools Packet

1. Timeline/ Calendar/ Work plan

The timeline, calendar and work plan documents each highlight a different aspect of the plan.

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- The Calendar is primarily useful for providing a means of tracking months at a glance and making sure each month's holidays and all your team member's "out of office" dates are taken into account when setting up your plan. (link to [SAMPLE & TEMPLATE](#))
- The Timeline is primarily focused on assigning a deadline to each task and milestone in the proposal development process. (link to [SAMPLE & TEMPLATE](#))
- The Work plan is a list of the tasks to be completed arranged by date. Unlike the calendar, this document allows for additional information to be connected to the task such as team member responsible and any additional notes. (link to [SAMPLE & TEMPLATE](#))

Frequently revisit the timeline of choice in weekly meetings and ensure everyone on the proposal team has access to the document.

2. Roles and Responsibilities Document

A draft of this document prepared ahead of the proposal kick-off meeting can serve as a conversation starter for the group. This document has been useful even in teams that have previously worked together in clarifying assumptions as to which tasks will be completed by which team member and identifying unfilled roles on the team, but will be especially useful in large, interdisciplinary teams working across departments and schools. Revise the document as appropriate for each team, including moving tasks to a different role. In some cases multiple roles may be filled by one team member, in others, tasks from a single role may be divided among two team members. Once complete, this document should be made available for reference in the proposal Dropbox or other shared folder. (link to [TEMPLATE](#))

3. RFA Table of Contents

The RFA Table of Contents (TOC) is the most complex but also the most effective at combining many different requirements and deadlines into a single document. The table should include all proposal elements that will be part of the complete package submitted to the sponsor. This tool can be very time consuming to construct, but frequently proves a valuable reference. In its most basic form, this document records the relevant page numbers from the RFA as well as agency specific proposal guides and policy statements. Other useful information that can be recorded on this document include: section page limits, section team leader name, section due date and a space for status updates and notes. Prior to submission, this document will also serve as a checklist to ensure all required proposal elements are complete.

4. Review Cycle

The review cycle document helps to plan and record the number of anticipated proposal drafts, the due dates for each, and the names of individuals who have agreed to review

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those drafts. Setting these dates early will allow reviewers to plan accordingly, and allow them time to provide meaningful feedback. In our experience, draft deadlines were far more likely to be met when reviewers were given dates ahead of time.

➤ **Proposal Kick-off Meeting**

The Proposal Kick-off Meeting should involve anyone expected to play a major role in the proposal development process including the lead PI, Co-PIs, Co-Investigators as well as the department or PI's administrative and budget development specialists. A template agenda available here includes suggested topics to cover at the kick-off meeting including a portion of time dedicated to reviewing and revising the draft Project Management Tools packet.

➤ **Weekly Check-In Meetings**

A standing weekly meeting dedicated to status updates on the progress of non-technical aspects of the proposal, and review of the timeline or calendar can go a long way toward keeping the proposal development process on track. It can also reduce time spent exchanging emails and phone calls, as team members will often keep a list of items for discussion during this time. Depending on the complexity of the proposal, a 30 minute teleconference can often be sufficient for this purpose. Discussions may include progress updates on:

- **Technical Proposal**
- **Budget Development**
- **Subcontract Document Collection**
- **Letter of Support Collection**
- **CV/Biosketch Collection**

➤ **Dropbox/ Shared Folder:**

Having access to a shared folder space when coordinating the development of a large proposal allows for efficient distribution of the documents associated with the proposal. This will eliminate various versions of proposal documents being emailed back-and-forth, and will keep the most current versions of all documents in one place that all appropriate team members have access to anytime. We have found Dropbox to be an ideal tool for proposal teams to share proposal sections, sponsor information, and project management documents. To use Dropbox, you will need to download and install Dropbox on your computer. You can set up an account at <https://www.dropbox.com/>. We have typically organized the Dropbox to include the following folders: **Technical Proposal** (Abstract, Executive Summary, Research Strategy), **Budget** (Budget spreadsheet, Budget narrative), **Supplemental Documents** (Appendixes, Past Performance References and Biosketches), **Subcontract Documents** (Subcontract budget, Scope of Work, etc.), **Sponsor Documents** (FOA, FAQs, modifications, documents from the prime applicant, etc.) and **Project Management:** (Timelines, Roles & Responsibilities, Contact list, Primers). Each folder should have an **Archive** subfolder for old versions; *never delete an old version –always move to the Archive folder*).

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One note of caution when working with documents in Dropbox, we have found it to be a best practice to never *move* a file/folder from the Dropbox to your desktop or another folder (intending to copy it), as it will delete the file/folder from the Dropbox. The only safe protocol is to copy the document located in the Dropbox and paste it onto your computer. CPMG recommends that you save and rename any file that you intend to edit (see file naming convention recommendations below) and replace it in the Dropbox after you have finished your modifications.

➤ **Other Resources:**

- **Document Naming Convention Primer:** Provides an example of a system for naming documents to help with version integrity when there are multiple people working on a document. This is especially important when proposal sections are kept in a shared folder.
- **Subcontract Document Request Checklist:** This document provides template for requesting items from subcontractors. The checklist should be modified as appropriate, including instructions for formatting of documents and a copy of the RFA should be provided. Requesting draft documents ahead of the final signed copies can help to prevent delays that might occur when mistakes or omissions are identified at the deadline.
- **Subcontract Document Tracker/Biosketch & CV tracking document:** Examples of tables that can be used to track receipt of the multitude of documents required from Co-Investigators, Partners and Subcontractors. When kept in the Project Management folder of a proposal dropbox this can serve as useful communication tool that allows proposal team members to quickly ascertain what documents are outstanding. Letters of Support are another document set in which it might be useful to prepare a tracking table.
- **Budget Justification Primer:** A general guide for writing a budget justification.
- **UW Boilerplate – Organizational Overview**