

English Corner

Business Proposal Writing



By Vivien Ho

Accounting personnel are known to be good at dealing with figures. But to be successful, accounting personnel must also learn how to express themselves clearly and concisely in their writing, as this is how they demonstrate their technical competence. Good written communication makes a positive first impression. It is, therefore, very important that accounting personnel should be well prepared for the degree of precision and organization required in writing various types of document, such as a business proposal.

What is a business proposal? It is a type of report which provides suggestions to solve the problems identified or to make an offer to do something. Its purpose is to persuade readers to follow a course of action as suggested. “Proposal” is derived from the word “propose” and makes a proposition to readers which they can accept or reject. What makes your business proposal readily accepted? Senior managers of large organizations give three basic criteria for a good business proposal:

1. It must meet the needs of the readers and answer the questions in their minds.
2. It must have a clear and logical structure.
3. It must be written in good English with correct grammar and spelling.

To satisfy criterion 1, it is necessary to define what you want to achieve in the business proposal. As you are leading the readers towards making a decision that you want them to make, you must set the objectives to meet the needs of the readers. In other words, accepting the proposal should benefit your readers.

A proposal has quite a rigid structure and generally consists of three major components: the beginning, the middle and the end. To satisfy criterion 2, you should break the proposal into distinct sections, sub-subsections, sub-sub-sections, and so on, so the readers can easily navigate the business plan. Each major section and sub-section should be identified with a brief but informative heading.

The beginning includes the title page, contents page, executive summary (which is also known as abstract or synopsis) and the introduction.



Title page

This contains the title of the proposal, the name of the writers and the date it was submitted.

Contents page

This lists various sections and sub-sections of the proposal in the order that they appear.

Executive summary

This contains a complete overview of the proposal. It should include your intention (purpose), outline (what was done and how it was done), key findings / analysis, main conclusions and main recommendations. Write this section only after you have written the proposal. A good executive summary will arouse the interest of the readers and make them want to read on.

Introduction

This gives the background to the proposal and states its objectives and scope.

The middle part is the main body of the proposal, in which you develop your ideas in terms of the detailed facts, findings and analysis, and shows how these were arrived at. One of the keys to successful proposal writing is to define the problems clearly. Data and / or information must be organized in a logical sequence and developed logically towards the conclusions on the basis of the stated premises. Basic objectives and premises can be combined in the form of a problem to be solved by the proposal.

While the main body should contain sufficient information to justify the conclusions and recommendations, you should be able to differentiate between facts and details and include facts only. All other irrelevant information and / or details should be eliminated.

The end of the report should contain the conclusions, recommendations, appendixes and references.

Conclusions

These are drawn from the analysis in the previous section and should be clear and concise. As the conclusions should cover what you have deduced from the analysis in the main body, no new information should be included.

Recommendations

You should highlight any actions / suggestions / improvements that need to be followed. These should relate clearly to what has been discussed in the previous conclusions. Again, no new information should be included.

Appendixes

These are used to supplement the information contained in the main body of the proposal, and can include questionnaires, statistical or comparative information, charts and diagrams. Appendixes should be numbered so that they can be referred to in the main body easily.



References / Bibliography

The readers may wish to check the writer's facts to be assured that the information presented is genuine, or, if someone's opinion is being quoted, to know whose opinion it was and where and when it was expressed.

There is a distinction between references and bibliography. References are items referred to in the text whereas the bibliography contains additional information not specifically referred to, but which readers may want to follow up.

The Harvard System of Referencing (the author-date system) is the most popular method used as it identifies the source of the reference immediately. The author's name and the year of publication is placed (in parentheses) at the end of the sentence or paragraph in which reference to the publication has been made. This system must be used with a reference list, to be put at the end of the proposal, with all items listed alphabetically by author or authorship for books, websites or journal articles.

To satisfy criterion 3, no words should be misspelled and the text should be grammatically correct throughout the whole document. It is always advisable to keep the sentences and paragraphs relatively short and jargon free to aid readers' understanding. A proposal is usually written in the present and future tense to describe events which are expected to or will happen. It is generally written in the third person, which means not using "I" or "we". It is also advisable to use the active voice instead of the passive voice. In addition, for effective written communication, the proposal should be written with the "5Cs" in mind: clearness, conciseness, correctness, completeness and courtesy.

With regards to the proposal's layout and presentation, most writers use a progressive numbering system. The main sections are numbered 1, 2, 3, and so on, sub-sections are given a decimal number 1.1, 1.2, 1.3, and so on, sub-sub-sections can be further split into 1.11, 1.12, 1.13, and so on. Set the whole document generously by using wide margins; space out paragraphs and indent sub-sections and sub-sub-sections. It will make a difference.

Last but not least; do a final check to ensure you have addressed the three criteria. Submit your business proposal on time to let readers understand and accept your unique insights.

Vivien Ho holds a BBA degree majoring in Human Resources from the University of RMIT, Australia and an MEd degree in Teaching in Professional, Vocational and Higher Education from the Hong Kong Polytechnic University. She is currently a lecturer at HKU SPACE and was awarded the Outstanding Teacher Award by HKU SPACE in 2006.