



# TEXAS TECH UNIVERSITY®

## CRAFTING A CONCEPT PAPER FOR FUNDED RESEARCH

***NOTE:** Some funders require specific content and/or a specific format. The generic template (see p. 4) is designed to reflect content required by most funders. Once you complete the generic template, text can be rearranged and modified as necessary to satisfy the requirements of targeted funders.*

### Why Take the Time?

All research projects begin with a good idea. To transform your good idea into a fundable research project, creating a work plan is a critical first step. Once the work plan is completed, ***strategically crafting and sharing a two-page concept paper is an efficient and effective way to obtain from targeted funders almost immediate feedback on the strengths and weaknesses of your proposed project.*** Submitting your project in response to a competitive request for proposal typically requires waiting several months for reviewer comments on an application package that often requires 50+ pages of documents.

Consider that roughly 50% of National Science Foundation and 80% of National Institutes of Health funding is awarded through unsolicited, investigator-initiated proposals (Cronan & Deckard, *New Faculty Guide to Competing for Research Funding*, 2016 [2<sup>nd</sup> Ed.], p. 96). As the data suggest, funders want to fund good research, no matter how they learn about it. ***There is no need to wait until a formal call for proposals is announced*** to share your research project idea.

The ***purpose of a concept paper*** from the funder's point of view is to determine if the proposed project aligns with their mission and strategic goals, is competitive and fundable, and is likely to yield results that will advance the field. The researcher's purpose in developing a concept paper is to capture the interest of the funder, demonstrate the project is worthy of consideration, and obtain important feedback to strengthen the full application for funding.

Investing time – your most precious commodity – to craft and share a concept paper before beginning the arduous task of preparing a full application yields ***several significant benefits:***

- Descriptions for each component of your project – Because a concept paper is essentially a “mini” project narrative, preparing the concept paper requires that you carefully think through all aspects of your research project.
  - More competitive application – Critical feedback from other researchers in your field and targeted funders will provide valuable guidance on how to address identified weaknesses and bolster your project's strengths.
  - Relationships with program officers – Sharing a concept paper is an effective way for a program officer to get to know you and your research interests, and for you to better understand how to fit your research into their program area. In some cases, program officers will suggest as a better fit
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another program within their agency. And, because they learn about you and your research interests, they may alert you to upcoming opportunities prior to their formal release.

- Best use of your valuable time – If your project is not supported or encouraged, you need not expend the time necessary to submit a full proposal. If your project is supported, you have an informed head start on the required components of a pre- or full proposal.

### **You Must Write for Your Audience**

The first, second, and last rule of crafting any type of communication is ***know your audience***. While substantially the same in content, the concept paper you send to targeted funders – even for the exact same project – must be different based on each funder’s strategic priorities as well as the expertise of the program officers.

It is critical to keep in mind that ***the concept paper is a sales pitch*** – you are selling the significance and potential impact of your idea. Sending a version that is not aligned with the mission and priorities of the funder you are targeting will undermine the effectiveness of your sales pitch. Bottom line: ***you cannot send identical versions to multiple funders***.

The ***audience for the first iteration*** of your concept paper is your ***research colleagues*** – those here at Texas Tech, mentors at other institutions, and researchers who have expertise and funding success in your research area. For this audience, jargon and technical language is acceptable. Once you consider and incorporate feedback from your colleagues, the ***audience for the second iteration*** of your concept paper is ***targeted funders***. For some funders, the program officers will be generalists or even lay persons; therefore, using jargon and technical language will not effectively sell your project and reduce the likelihood of a positive response.

### **Crafting and Writing Strategies**

***Crafting (versus writing) a compelling concept paper takes time!*** It is a different process than writing a journal article to inform the literature because your objective is to sell the funder on the significance of your research project. The concept paper is carefully crafted through ***deliberate and strategic choices*** in the makeup of your research team; the design of your project; the words you select to describe its significance, purpose, and impact; and how you link it to the mission and priorities of targeted funders.

It is ***critical that the program officer “see” their organization in your concept paper***, so you must take the time to review their strategic plan, funding priority areas, annual reports, grants awarded... any information that will allow you to ***use their words*** in your paper. If your concept paper is demonstrably aligned with their priorities, you greatly enhance the likelihood of receiving positive feedback.

***The title of your project should be thoughtfully crafted*** since it comprises the first words readers will encounter about your research. As your initial sales pitch, the title should convey in a straightforward way what you intend to do and why it matters. Start by identifying words that capture the problem you will address, your project’s potential impact, and the targeted funder’s priorities. Use those words to create a title of no more than 10 words, then identify a “short title” that effectively represents the longer version. The technique of using the short title instead of “this study” or “this project” in the concept paper can help embed the content of your research proposal in the project officer’s mind, a tremendous advantage given the hundreds of proposals they review.

A concept paper is an overview of your proposed research. ***The alignment of your project’s significance, innovation, and impact with the targeted funder’s priorities is critical***, so make those connections at every opportunity (see “Concept Paper Template” below). ***These elements are the “so what?” of your***

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**sales pitch.** The funder should readily agree that investing in your project will not only inform the literature and advance the knowledge base of your field, but also lead to improvements in policy and practice. This level of impact provides greater “bang for the buck” as their investment reaches beyond your project. Therefore, **think grandiosely** (“impressive due to uncommon largeness, scope, effect”) and confidently articulate the broad potential impacts of the work you are asking them to fund.

**Don’t overwhelm the reader with detail** and avoid sounding vague or unsure about what your research will accomplish. Use active (vs. passive) voice to convey your ability to carry out the research. **Be confident, positive, and definitive** (e.g., “Short Title will impact...” not “We believe the impact of this project...”) and avoid using conditional words (i.e., but, if, however) that raise doubts about any element of your project.

The **appearance and layout of your concept paper is important.** A page dense with text is very difficult to read. White space allows the reader to mentally rest and headings/subheadings help the reviewer organize the components of your project. Correct and consistent grammar, spelling, and punctuation ensure the reader is not distracted from the substance of your proposal.

Your concept paper should have 1” margins; use an 11- or 12-point serif font; use the block paragraph style; include a footer with your project short title, last name, date, and page number; and **not exceed two single-spaced pages.**

### **Share Your Concept Paper**

As you craft your first draft, be sure to include all the important content, even if you exceed two pages. Share the first draft with an RDT member or your college’s grant writer, who can recommend strategic content and editing revisions to satisfy the two-page limit.

After considering and incorporating these suggestions, share this first iteration of your concept paper with research colleagues – those at Texas Tech as well as those at other institutions who are familiar with you and your area of research. Also share it with researchers preeminent in your field and/or who have received funding for related research. They typically are happy to provide feedback to a colleague pursuing research in their field.

Consider and incorporate your colleagues’ feedback. If the concept paper will be sent to more than one funder, be sure each version is crafted with each targeted funder in mind. Ask an RDT member or your college’s grant writer to review and comment on this second iteration, then share your concept paper(s) with the targeted funder(s) and schedule an appointment/phone call to discuss their feedback.

### **Concept Paper Template**

The generic template below includes information of interest to all potential funders. Simply delete the first three pages of this document and begin completing the template. Some funders require specific content and/or a specific format; RDT or your college’s grant writer can help determine if this is the case for a funder you will target. Once you complete the generic template, text can be rearranged and modified as necessary to satisfy the requirements of targeted funders.

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TEXAS TECH UNIVERSITY®

**TITLE OF RESEARCH PROJECT**

Dr. <name>, <faculty rank>

<department>

\_\_\_\_\_@ttu.edu; 806-834-\_\_\_\_\_ office; \_\_\_\_-\_\_\_\_-\_\_\_\_\_ cell (optional)

***This opening “mini abstract” (2 paragraphs) will determine the project officer’s interest in your research*** and create a strong impression of the merits of your project. Pay special attention to the first two sentences. They must be persuasive regarding your project’s significance and impact so as to “grab” your audience and keep them reading.

Briefly summarize (1) the significant problem or gap you will address and why it is important; (2) the expected outcomes; and (3) the potential broad (grandiose) impact.

Include language to demonstrate you understand the strategic priorities of the targeted funder as well as the types of projects they fund. Make a ***clear and strong link between their priorities and your research***. Remember, you want them to “buy” your project, so sell it by explaining how your research advances their cause (the “so what?”). Use words and phrases from the funder’s strategic plan and other funder information so the program officer sees their organization reflected in your project.

**Background and Purpose (3 paragraphs)**

The goal of this section is to convince the funder you are knowledgeable about your research topic *and* more research is necessary to fill gaps or expand upon the literature and address critical problems or needs. Lay the foundation for informing policy and practice to enhance the impact (bang for the buck) of the funder’s investment in you and your research.

Start with a ***clear and concise description of the research topic*** (not your project... that comes in the next section). Include a brief summary of the literature – citing only seminal, significant, and compelling sources – to provide the context for your project and discuss what others have discovered and/or accomplished. Highlight if you discover there is little or no research directly aligned with your project. How and how much you discuss the literature is driven by the knowledge base of your audience.

Describe the ***purpose of your research*** project: identify the problem or need you intend to address and how your project will address it. Provide evidence to support the contention that your research project addresses a significant and/or timely problem. Relevant data can be convincing, so use it if you have it; just do not get bogged down in its minutia.

Finally, describe ***the “so what?”; why your project matters***. As you craft this description, keep in mind that most program officers are not as immersed as you are in the topic. Therefore, you must persuade them that they really should care about the specific problem your research will address. Do this by linking the problem to their organization’s priorities and describing in broad, grandiose terms the potential short- and long-term impact of your project.

### **Project Description (4 paragraphs)**

Concisely describe your research project, including ***what (not how) you plan to do; who is involved*** in the research; and ***who will benefit***, directly and indirectly. Resist the temptation to get mired in the details. If it is a pilot project to collect preliminary data and/or refine research methodologies, be direct in saying so.

***If applicable, highlight the innovative aspects of your research approach*** to set your project apart from the other proposals the program officer reads.

List the ***research questions, goal(s), and objectives*** of your project. You will have laid the foundation for them in the previous section, so no elaboration is needed.

Briefly describe – based on your audience – ***how you will conduct the research***, including the research methodology; the data you will collect; and how you will analyze the data. Based on your *Project Work Plan*, describe ***major milestones and a general timeline*** for what you will accomplish. As always, avoid the temptation to include the nitty-gritty details.

Finally, describe the ***expected outcomes*** of your project, linked to your research questions, goals, and objectives. Discuss these outcomes in terms of their impact on your target population and others who will benefit directly and indirectly.

### **Project Needs and Key Personnel (1 paragraph)**

You will not include a detailed budget with your concept paper; however, the budget details are important. Using information from your *Project Work Plan*, work with your designated ORS analyst to begin preparing the budget justification and create an initial budget spreadsheet.

This section should include an ***estimate of total costs*** (direct and indirect), ***categories of expenses***, and the ***project timeframe*** (start and end dates in months/years). Next briefly discuss your ***qualifications as PI*** and the ***expertise of the research team as a whole***.

### **Impact of Project (1 paragraph)**

The purpose of this section is to ***solidify the funder's final impression of your project as being important to their mission***. Very briefly restate why the project is important, its expected outcomes, and how it will add new knowledge to your field and inform policy and practice.

End the concept paper with a strong statement of how your project aligns with the funder's strategic priorities, describing how your expected outcomes will impact the targeted population, the college and university, Lubbock, West Texas, the US, the world.

### **References**

Providing a list of references is ***not necessary*** at this stage. Have the list available should the program office wish to see it.