More Tips from the Trenches: Successful Project Summaries

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First, let's define our terms…

A project summary is a stand-alone document in a formal multi-part proposal that explains the goals, methods, and expected outcomes of the project

Different agencies call this document different names (abstract, executive summary)

It's always much shorter than the technical description (1 page or less—NIH ≤30 lines)

The project summary does for the full proposal what a picture postcard does for a famous painting

Project Summary

Project Description

Anton S. Barkhatkov (1917-2001). Near the lake. 1977

Poll Question #1

How important is the project summary to the success of your proposal?

a) Not as important as the technical description
b) Not as important as the overall budget
c) Not as important as having a novel method
d) Critical

How important is the project summary to the success of your proposal?

I'd say _critical_.

It's usually the first thing that most program officers and reviewers read, and first impressions are powerful.

And it may be the _only_ thing that some review panelists read.—_cme_

Even though it usually comes first in the proposal document, don't write the project summary until last

The project summary must present the entire scope of the project, which may have (probably has) evolved as you were writing

Map the summary to your technical project description

   Present the same concepts

   In the same order

   Using the same terminology

   So that reviewers remember them

Same concepts, same words, same order

Give the reviewer a guide of what's to come

To whip up a perfect project summary...

Celia's Project Summaries

follow the recipe!

Celia's Foolproof Project Summary

Ingredients:

What <u>problem</u> will you study and why is it important?

What <u>methods</u> will you use and why did you choose them?

What <u>results</u> do you expect and how will you analyze them?

How will funding your project <u>benefit</u> the agency?

Assemble ingredients in this order. Don't add ingredients or omit any. <u>Measure carefully</u>.

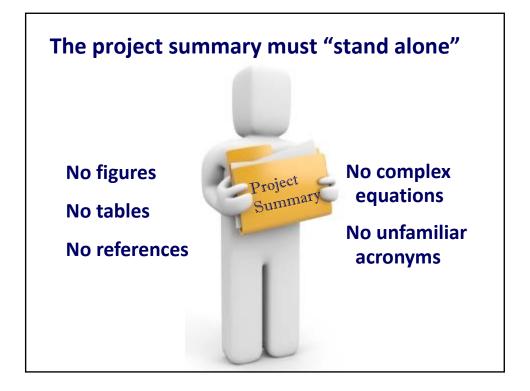Taste frequently and adjust seasonings.

Allow to rest before serving.

Special note for summaries for National Science Foundation proposals

The project summary must specifically discuss

⟹ **intellectual merit**

⟹ **broader impacts**

Use the recipe to write the first two paragraphs

Start a new paragraph with *Intellectual Merit:* and discuss the importance, feasibility, and likely success of the project

Start the final paragraph with *Broader Impacts:* and explain the collateral benefits of the project—training of students, applications to other fields, translation to new technologies
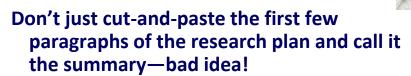
The project summary must "stand alone"

No figures

No tables

No references

No complex equations

No unfamiliar acronyms

Project Summary

Poll Question #2

How much time should you allow to write a good project summary?

a) **<3 hours; don't overthink it**

b) **1–2 days**

c) **At least 3 times as much time as you *think* it should take**

d) **A week**

How much time should you allow to write a good project summary?

Whether you write fast or slow,
a <u>clear</u>,
<u>concise</u>,
<u>compelling</u> project summary
will take more time than you expect and
will probably require *multiple* revisions

Don't write a partial project summary

Don't just cut-and-paste the first few paragraphs of the research plan and call it the summary—bad idea!

Must describe the *entire* project—hypotheses, goals and objectives, methods, data analysis, significance, intellectual merit*, broader impacts*, and benefits to the agency

Omissions and ambiguities in the summary raise immediate questions in reviewers' minds about the whole project

*for NSF proposals

Don't assume everybody reading your summary will be an expert in your narrow field—some will, but some won't, and they may all have equal votes

Advice from NIH:
"This section should be informative to other persons working in the same or <u>related</u> fields and insofar as possible <u>understandable to a scientifically or technically literate</u> reader."

Get rid of irrelevancies and discursions; eliminate introductory fluff*

Project summaries are always constrained by word or page limits

Don't waste precious space on any idea that is not directly relevant to your project, no matter how "interesting" it might be

Delete, rephrase, clarify, quantify

*In fact, eliminate *all* fluff; reviewers appreciate conciseness

http://online.physics.uiuc.edu/courses/phys496/Spring12/Lectures/Fluff.pdf

If your project is funded, the summary may be made public

Do not include any confidential or proprietary information

Don't put anything in the project summary that you wouldn't want to see on the agency's website

The summary should make you look good to prospective collaborators, other scientists, and other funders

To recap…

Follow the rules—witlessly

Map your summary to your technical narrative

Follow the four-ingredient recipe

Aim for the three C's: *clear, concise, compelling*

Write for a technically literate reader

Leave out proprietary information

Plan for time to revise and polish

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