

The Case

The Case is the foundation for funding—the reason why a funding organization will choose to fund your effort—the argument for their providing money for your project. Before generating the text that goes into the proposal itself, prepare your case in a separate document to make sure you have the logic and rationale in place. In my experience the case document works best as a one-page outline, with main points, bullets, and sentence fragments. Be prepared to spend a fair amount of time working on the case outline prior to generating proposal text. Then you can adapt the argument from the case into the format required by the proposal guidelines. If the guidelines are good, the case will flow naturally into prescribed layout.

A large part of proposal writing is building and substantiating the main pillars of the case. Keep the case outline available as a guideline as you write the proposal. Make sure that every statement in the proposal relates to the case and supports one of the basic pillars of the argument, and make sure you can prove each one of your claims.

Often you will find that you need to revisit the case statement as you develop the proposal. If you find that a line of thought is not consistent with the case, and you think the line of thought is worthwhile, take the time to revise the case outline. As a corollary, you will often find that you need to alter your proposed project to build up the case in some area of weakness. The most common example of this is tailoring the outcomes to better match the goals of the funding organization.

Five pillars of support

For convenience of thought, I have organized the case into five basic pillars. Your case outline may differ and elaborate. Regardless, if any one column is weak, so is the entire case, and it may not stand up in the rigors of competition. Though these pillars may seem obvious, overlooking one of them is one of the most common complaints of program officers and proposal reviewers.



The Need. From the very outset, the proposed project must meet a need or solve a clearly identified problem. Alternatively, the “need” could be taking advantage of a unique opportunity or other possibility such as new expanding knowledge. Research proposals fall into this category. For example, the Apollo moon missions inspired a great deal of spending without the promise of addressing any clearly identified societal ill.

Uniqueness. In order to compete with other proposals in the same coliseum, yours has to distinguish itself. You must offer something that no one else can offer, or in a superlative manner to anyone else on the playing field. Validation this area usually requires extensive knowledge of the field in which you are proposing to work.



Impact. Unless your project results in a significant, positive outcome, there is little incentive to pursue it.

Funding goals. Meeting the goals and objectives of the funding organization is paramount, yet, amazingly, many proposals fall short in this category. Also, proposals sometimes need a secondary pillar to demonstrate that the project could not be funded by other sources.



Feasibility. Good reviewers will scrutinize your team’s capabilities and credentials as well as proposed resources, methodology, deliverables, and timetable. You must satisfy the reviewers that your proposed effort stands a strong chance of bearing the promised results.

Case Questions

When building your case outline, here are several questions to consider that relate to the five pillars. While addressing these questions, remember that in the proposal you will need to substantiate and justify each of them. Therefore, think not only of a solid response to each question but how you will prove it to reviewers as well.

Need

- ? Why is this work important? Why does it matter?
- ? What problem does it solve?
- ? What opportunity does it take advantage of?
- ? How will your proposal address the need or opportunity?

Uniqueness

- ? What is unique about your solution?
- ? What else has been done or is being done in the field by others?
- ? How does your concept build on existing work?
- ? How is it different from existing work?
- ? Why will nothing else work better?
- ? What are the current standards and benchmarks for measuring success in this field?

Impact

- ? What significant, positive benefits will occur if the project is successful?
- ? Who are the beneficiaries?
- ? How widespread is the benefit?
- ? What are your target results compared to existing benchmarks?

Funding Goals

- ? How do you meet the expressed goals and objectives of the funding organization?
- ? How do you meet the goals of the solicitation?

Feasibility

- ? What specific factors give you confidence that the project will succeed?
- ? What preliminary work indicates success?
- ? Are the team members highly credentialed in the field?
- ? Are there sufficient areas of expertise to excel in all areas of work required to complete the project?
- ? Are the facilities sufficient to carry out the work?
- ? Are all required resources identified and planned for?
- ? Is the budget sufficient to fund all required resources?
- ? Is the work plan complete? Logical? Reasonable?
- ? Is the evaluation plan sound enough to demonstrate success convincingly?