



Center for
COMMUNICATION, COLLABORATION & CREATIVITY
at Texas State University

Preparing a Concept Paper for Funded Research

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Why Take the Time?	1
Write for Your Audience.....	1
Writing Strategies.....	2
Sharing Your Concept Paper	2
Concept Paper Template	4
Introduction	4
Background and Purpose	4
Project Description.....	4
Research Questions	5
Goal(s) and Objectives	5
Methodology and Timeline	5
Anticipated Outcomes.....	5
Project Needs and Cost.....	5
Significance of Project	6
Contact Information	6
Bibliography	6



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If you have questions or suggested improvements, please contact the [C3 Research Coordinator](#).

WHY TAKE THE TIME?

All research projects start with a good idea... and writing a concept paper is an **effective and efficient first step** in transforming your good idea into funded research.

The **purpose** of a concept paper from the funder's point of view is to determine if the proposed project aligns with the funder's 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 and demonstrate that the project is worthy of consideration.

Investing the time to create and share a concept paper before beginning the often arduous task of preparing a full proposal yields **several significant benefits**:

- Descriptions for each component of your idea – Because a concept paper is essentially a brief version of a full proposal, completing it will compel you to carefully and thoughtfully think through your entire research project.
- Targeting potential funders – After reviewing your concept paper, C3's Research Coordinator (RC) can better identify potential funders by ensuring your idea aligns with their articulated priorities and funding levels. In some cases, she will work with RCs from other colleges and University Advancement staff to expand the search for potential funders.
- More competitive proposal – Critical feedback from other researchers and potential funders will provide valuable guidance on how to address any gaps and weaknesses in your project and how to bolster your project's strengths.
- Relationship with program officer – 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 understand how to fit your research into their program area. The concept paper you share with them will provide a framework to guide your discussion. In some cases, program officers will suggest as a better fit another program within their agency. And, because they learn about your research interests during the discussion, they may alert you to upcoming opportunities prior to their formal release.
- Best use of your valuable time – If your idea is not supported or encouraged, there's no need to expend the time necessary to create a full proposal; if your idea is supported, you have a solid start on the required components of a pre- or full proposal.

WRITE FOR YOUR AUDIENCE

The first rule in developing any type of communication is **know your audience**. While substantially the same in form and function, the concept paper you disseminate to research colleagues **must** be different than the version you send to potential funders. And the versions you send to potential funders – even for the same project – **must** vary based on the background and expertise of the targeted program officers as well as their organizations' funding priorities. Keep in mind that the concept paper is the vehicle for "selling" the significance and viability of your idea... sending the same version without accommodating your specific audience will undermine the effectiveness of your sales pitch.

The **audience for the first iteration** of your concept paper is your research colleagues, both those here at Texas State as well as those at other institutions who have expertise and funding success in your research area. For this version, jargon and academic/scientific terms are acceptable.

Once you consider and incorporate feedback received from your research colleagues, the **audience for the second iteration** of your concept paper is potential funders. Do your homework and determine the background of the targeted program officer. For some funders, the program officers will be generalists or even lay persons, so the use of jargon and technical language will not effectively communicate your ideas and reduce the chances of your project receiving positive feedback.

WRITING STRATEGIES

Keep in mind that a concept paper is an overview of your research idea... the reader should be able to understand what you are researching, why it is important, and how the research will be conducted. Your **project's significance, innovation, and alignment with the funder's priorities are critical elements** of your concept paper, so be sure to include them at every opportunity (suggestions for doing so are offered in the *Concept Paper Template* below).

Don't overwhelm the reader with detail and avoid sounding vague or unsure about what your research will accomplish. Use active voice (see *General Writing Style Tips available on the C3 website*) to convey your ability to carry out the research. **Be positive and definitive** (e.g. "This project will examine..." as opposed to "This project plans/intends to examine....") as you provide a clear summary of your project and avoid using conditional words (i.e. but, if, however) that raise doubts about your ability to complete the project.

You want the program officer to see their organization reflected in your proposal, so it is critical that you 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" as you prepare your paper. If your concept paper is **demonstrably aligned with their priorities**, you enhance the likelihood of your project receiving positive feedback and encouragement to submit a full proposal.

Use graphics to create a visual image of your project... combining these with text dramatically increases the reader's retention as sometimes complex ideas become easier to understand.

The **appearance and layout** of your document is important. White space between headings and on the margins allows the reader to "rest" while noting shifts from one set of ideas to another. Correct grammar, spelling, punctuation, etc. prevent the reader from being distracted from the substance of your idea (see *General Writing Style Tips* to avoid common errors and inconsistencies).

Specifically, your concept paper should have 1" margins; use at least an 11 font size; include a footer with your last name, date, and page numbers; and be no more than four single-spaced pages, likely shorter if writing for a program officer without a strong background in your field.

SHARING YOUR CONCEPT PAPER

Share your first draft with the C3 [Research Coordinator](#), who can make both content and editing recommendations, suggest potential C3 and/or University collaborators, and begin searching for potential funders.

Consider and incorporate the Research Coordinator's suggestions. Share this first iteration of your concept paper with research colleagues, including colleagues at Texas State and other institutions who are familiar with you and your research interests as well as researchers who are preeminent in your field and/or who have received funding for related research.

Consider and incorporate feedback received from your research colleagues. Prepare the second iteration(s) keeping your audience in mind... if you will share the concept paper with more than one funder, be sure each version is specifically written with each targeted funder in mind. Ask the Research Coordinator to review and comment, then share your concept paper with potential funder(s).

CONCEPT PAPER TEMPLATE

This is a generic template meant to include information of interest to all potential funders. Once a specific funder(s) is identified, the Research Coordinator will determine if the funder has a specific required template.

TITLE OF RESEARCH PROJECT

Dr. <name>, <faculty rank>
Texas State University

Introduction

Think of the introduction as a **mini abstract**. Pay special attention to the opening sentences and make them compelling... you want to “grab” your audience so they will continue reading!

Briefly summarize the problem to be addressed and its significance; how you will address the problem; your research question(s), goal(s), and objectives; and anticipated outcomes.

For the version being shared with a program officer, include language to demonstrate you have done your homework and understand the strategic priorities of the funding agency as well as the types of projects they fund. Make a **clear and strong link between their priorities and your research idea**. Remember, you want them to “buy” your idea, so sell it by explaining how your research advances their cause. Use information from the funder’s website, especially their strategic plan and grants awarded, so the program officer literally sees their organization reflected in your project.

Background and Purpose

The goal of this section is to convince the reader that you are well-versed in the history and current state of your research topic *and* that more research is necessary to address existing gaps, expand upon, or replicate studies in the literature.

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 seminal, significant, and compelling sources – and discuss what others have discovered and/or accomplished.

Describe the **purpose of your research** project: identify the question, problem, or need that 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 or need. Data are usually convincing, so use statistical data if you have it; just don’t get bogged down in its minutia. If you don’t have any relevant data, contact the [Research Coordinator](#) who can assist in connecting you with data resources.

Finally, describe **why your project matters**. As you construct this description, keep in mind that the program officer likely does not “live and breathe” the topic and is not as knowledgeable as you are; therefore, s/he will need to be persuaded that s/he really should care about the specific problem/need your research will address. Linking the problem/need to their organization’s priorities is a must.

Project Description

Concisely describe your research project, including **what you plan to do** (the *Methodology and Timelines* subsection will describe how you plan to do it); **who is involved** in the research; and **who will benefit**, directly and indirectly. Don’t get bogged down in the details. If it is a pilot project to collect preliminary data and/or refine research methodologies, say so.

Describe the **innovative aspects of your research approach** to set your project apart from all the other proposals the program officer will review.

Connect the description to the background and purpose presented in the previous section by indicating the extent to which your project addresses an existing gap, expands upon, or replicates a study in the literature.

Research Questions

Present the research question(s) your project will answer and link the question(s) to the background and purpose. For each question, describe:

- the data you will collect;
- how you will analyze the data;
- the suitability of the analytic method(s) to the research question; and
- why it is important to answer the research question.

Identify any limitations of your research – specifically, what your project will not or cannot discover and why – as well as any ethical issues that may arise during the research process.

Goal(s) and Objectives

Outline in prioritized order, if possible, your goal(s) and objectives. If your project has more than one goal, identify specific objectives for each individual goal.

A goal is a succinct statement describing a broad or abstract intent or condition. An objective is an outcome required to achieve its related goal and includes “who, what, and when” information. Objectives should be SMART – specific, measurable, achievable, realistic, and time-bound.

Methodology and Timeline

This section should convey to the reader that you have thought through the scope of the study. When describing how your project will be carried out, **focus on the innovative and most important** techniques, processes, and activities.

Include milestones and general timelines for what you will accomplish. As always, avoid the temptation to include the nitty-gritty details. **Consider using a table** to convey this information so the reader can more easily see the connections among your goal(s), objectives, activities, milestones, and timeline.

Anticipated Outcomes

Describe the anticipated outcomes of your project, including those related to your research question(s), goal(s), and objectives.

Think in broad terms and identify who benefits from the research project, considering its impact upon students, teachers, faculty, schools, districts, the college and university, and society in general... and then **link these to the funder's priorities**. Finally, describe how your findings will add to your field's body of knowledge.

Project Needs and Cost

It is not necessary to include a detailed budget but you will need some of the details to properly prepare this section and beginning your budget narrative is a good way to start. This section should include an estimate of total direct costs and, if applicable, total indirect costs; the duration of the

project; and descriptions of the project's major costs. Describe the allocation of key personnel and their relevant qualifications as well as significant costs related to undergraduate/graduate students, participant support, consultants, travel, equipment, and supplies.

Significance of Project

You will have already addressed everything recommended for this section... the purpose is to *consolidate and repeat the key elements* here so the reader's final impression is of the significance of your project, both to your field of research and to them as the funder.

Very briefly restate why the project is important and how it is innovative; its goal(s), objectives, and expected outcomes; and how it adds new knowledge to your field. End this section with a strong statement of how the project aligns with the funder's strategic priorities.

Contact Information

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Bibliography

(if appropriate/necessary)